

# Political Trust – More Personal Than We Thought?

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Explaining How and When Personality Traits Affect Political Trust

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The cover photo depicts The White House, the residence and workplace of the president of the United States, in the style of a Rorschach test. The picture symbolizes how psychological factors, such as personality traits, shape how individuals evaluate political institutions.

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*For my mother, Ann-Christine.*



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## **Abstract**

Political trust is crucial for a well-functioning society. Yet few countries enjoy the benefits of high political trust, such as high political participation, tax compliance, a rule-abiding citizenry, and high GDP. This makes politicians and academics ask: how is trust in institutions built? Trust in political institutions is considered to be an individual's evaluation of institutional performance, but individuals within the same country make very different assessments. In this dissertation, I show that personality traits that are genetic and socialized at an early age can help explain why individuals' trust assessments differ. As personality traits reflect individuals' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional patterns, I argue that traits affect political trust in three ways, directly through our general tendencies, indirectly through how we process information and experiences, or how we interact with institutions. In three research papers, I study the relationship between personality traits and political trust in different political contexts, using different measurements of personality traits, political institutions, and institutional experiences. The results show that personality traits contribute to explaining why individuals' levels of trust in the same institutions differ. I conclude that personality traits are an important explanation for how political trust is formed and need to be taken into account when studying how trust changes over time.



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## Sammanfattning på svenska

Förtroende för myndigheter anses vara nödvändigt för ett välfungerande samhälle. Trots detta är det få samhällen som får njuta av frukterna av högt förtroende såsom högt politiskt deltagande, skattebetalningsvilja, regelefterlevnad, samt BNP. Det gör att många frågar sig, hur skapas förtroende för myndigheter? Förtroende för myndigheter anses bero på hur individer upplever att institutioner presterar, men studier har visat att individer i samma land skiljer sig gällande hur mycket de litar på institutioner. I den här avhandlingen studerar jag hur och när individens grundläggande personlighetsdrag, som beror på genetik och tidig socialisering, kan förklara varför individens förtroendeför myndigheter skiljer sig åt.

Genom att personlighetstyper karaktäriserar individens emotionella, beteendemässiga, och kognitiva tendenser argumenterar jag att personlighetstyper kan påverka förtroende för myndigheter på tre olika sätt. Personlighetstyper kan påverka förtroendet direkt genom att personlighetstyper fångar individens världsbild, till exempel cyniska och ängsliga personlighetstyper uppfattar sin omvärld på ett annat sätt än optimistiska och medkännande individer, vilket kan påverka deras förtroende. Personlighetstyper kan också påverka förtroende indirekt då personlighetstyper påverkar hur individer bearbetar information och erfarenheter. Men personlighetstyper kan också ha en indirekt inverkan på förtroende genom att personlighetstyper påverkar hur individer interagerar med myndigheter.

I tre artiklar studerar jag sambandet mellan personlighetstyper och förtroende för myndigheter i olika länder med användning av olika sätt att mäta institutioner, personlighetstyper och interaktioner med institutioner. Resultaten från de empiriska undersökningarna visar att per-

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sonlighetstyper bidrar till att förklara hur och när individer litar på institutioner. Avhandlingen visar att personlighetstyper är en viktig förklaring till hur förtroende för myndigheter byggs vilket betyder att personlighetstyper bör inkluderas när vi studerar hur tillit förändras över tid.



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# 1 Introduction

Individuals' trust in political institutions is a critical evaluation of a political system's legitimacy (Almond and Verba 1963; Easton 1975; Norris 1999). In the ideal case, individuals continuously seek and evaluate evidence to trust or distrust institutions. For example, institutions may impartially and efficiently deliver services like jobs, welfare, security, and safe drinking water. But they may also withhold services, exert preferential treatment, or extort individuals in exchange for goods. In the former case, individuals have good reasons to trust institutions, but not in the latter. Therefore, how institutions perform is considered the main factor determining whether individuals trust institutions or not (van der Meer and Hakhverdian 2017).

However, it is puzzling how much individuals differ in their trust in the same political institutions (Zmerli and van der Meer 2017a; Torcal and Christmann 2021; Dalton 2004; Hetherington 2005). While people generally shun corruption and poor performance, observing and experiencing institutions' wrongdoings does not affect individuals similarly since we have different emotional, cognitive, and behavioral func-

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tions (Mondak, Hayes, and Canache 2017; McCrae and Costa 2003, 25). Therefore, removing the individuals perceiving political institutions from the equation is a mistake.

There are many reasons why individuals differ from one another. For example, we have varying political attitudes on what should be done in society, we differ in the level and content of our education, we have different emotions where some are more happy, content or negative, and we also have various personalities where you can be more or less hard-working, anxious and intellectual (Gerber et al. 2011). Moreover, we are urged to know what people are like to know what we can expect from others – will they bring creative ideas, cooperate, or betray us? Therefore personality not only describes a person but can also be a tool to predict outcomes, for example, diagnosing patients, selecting job candidates, rule adherence, and political participation (Gerber, Huber, Doherty, Dowling, and Panagopoulos 2013; Terracciano et al. 2009; Rammstedt, Lechner, and Weiß 2022).

Personality has been used to predict different outcomes for more than 2000 years and first entailed that individual characteristics were categorized according to the solar position at birth. Yet much has happened in the study of personality since then. Notably, personality has emerged as one of the main subdivisions of psychology. Nowadays, personalities are described as the dimensions of a person's emotional, cognitive, and behavioral patterns, which are quite stable over time. Personality is partially inherited and socialized, but we also show different sides of ourselves in different environments (Mondak 2010). However, as personality is something humans believe everyone has, it has been surprisingly absent in political science. Thus, given that personality is a defining and omnipresent feature, like gender and ideology, the lack of research on how personality affects political attitudes

is especially surprising.

I ask whether personality traits affect political trust? When studying personality, the model with the broadest support is the Big Five Factor theory which categorizes individual differences according to the traits openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability. These factors are partially inherited and socialized from a young age and begin to stabilize in young adulthood (Borghans et al. 2008; Caspi, Roberts, and Shiner 2005). Moreover, personality traits affect how people seek and process information and experiences and are therefore argued to affect evaluations of political institutions' trustworthiness. In conclusion, political science should pay attention to personality traits since they precede or interact with factors previously found to affect political trust, such as experience with authorities (Marien and Werner 2019; Kumlin 2004).

In this dissertation, I argue that there are three pathways for personalities to affect political trust attitudes. First, personality traits affect our general perspective about the world around us. For example, cynical and anxious versus optimistic and compassionate individuals have different outlooks in life, which may affect their beliefs about the trustworthiness of political actors and institutions.

Second, personality affects how individuals process and interpret information and experiences and may affect how political actors and institutions are evaluated. For example, imagine a positive and a skeptical individual reading the news about a government official caught and convicted for taking bribes. The response to reading about corruption could be that the state apparatus is working and will successfully convict people for misconduct. But it is also possible that in reading this, you think this is just the tip of the iceberg and corruption is still widespread. A classic example of *is the glass half empty or half full?*

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What this means is that individuals may react differently to the same information, but the reason why and the extent to which this information changes their attitudes may also differ because of their personalities. For example, an anxious person may be more receptive to negative information, which is a risk when interacting with public officials. Likewise, a sympathetic person who believes in the good in other people might also be particularly appalled by wrongdoings because it is contrary to their expectations and reduces their trust in political institutions. Consequently, I argue that personality traits may moderate the effect of information about or experience with institutions on political trust.

Third, people experience different interactions with institutions. Moreover, the political context and institutional features or specific situations are known to affect how people with different personality traits think and behave (Mondak 2010; Freitag and Ackermann 2016; Gerber et al. 2010). Therefore, personality may also affect how an individual behaves when encountering political actors and institutions. For example, highly critical, suspicious, or cynical individuals may behave so that they are treated more harshly by government actors and institutions. Again, envisage an individual being fined for speeding or getting a random vehicle inspection. This means they may be selected into other experiences that someone who is less critical or suspicious is unlikely to experience. I, therefore, argue that experiences with institutions may mediate the effect of personality traits on political trust.

Consequently, this dissertation makes several important theoretical contributions to the literature by arguing that personalities may affect trust attitudes in three ways; 1) directly through our general tendencies, 2) indirectly through how we process information and experiences, or 3) through how we interact with institutions.

While these theoretical pathways instill an expectation for personality traits to affect political trust formation, previous studies on the Big Five and political trust have resulted in contradictory findings. Openness, extraversion, and conscientiousness have, in some studies, been found to have a positive relationship with political trust. Still, other studies found a negative relationship or no link at all (Anderson 2010; Freitag and Ackermann 2016; Mondak and Halperin 2008; Bromme, Rothmund, and Azevedo 2022). So what can explain the contradictory findings?

This dissertation's main contribution lies in the theoretical development and empirical testing of factors that can explain the variation in previous findings and, therefore, contributes to our broader understanding of the effects of personality traits on trust. First, by focusing on the dependent variable political trust by studying trust in specific institutions. Second, I focus on the independent variable personality traits to study higher and lower personality categories. Third, I suggest moderating and mediating effects of institutional experiences and personality traits on political trust.

Starting with developing explanations for *how* personality traits affect political trust. Previous research on the effect of personality traits on trust defined political trust as unidimensional and therefore made one composite trust score. But contemporary research on political trust has shown that individuals evaluate institutions independently (van der Meer and Ouattara 2019) and the effect of traits should therefore be tested on trust in political parties, government, parliament, civil service, and the courts one at a time. In paper one, I take up this discussion in detail and test its implications, where I show that people scoring high on one trait trust one institution but not another.

My second explanation also relates to *how* personality traits affect

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political trust and focus on how personality is conceptualized and tested. Since the creation of the Big Five framework, each personality trait was conceptualized to comprise several lower categories (Denissen et al. 2020; Costa, McCrae, and Dye 1991; Costa and McCrae 1995; Paunonen and Ashton 2001). Conscientiousness, for example, contains a sense of duty and cautiousness. The lower categories have often been used for theory-building by developing expectations that lower categories like cautiousness should lead to lower trust and other categories like dutifulness should lead to higher political trust (Cawvey et al. 2018b). Given the theoretical expectations and that using the lower categories of traits is commonplace in psychology, it is surprising that previous studies in political science only measure personality traits with the standard Big Five model (Gerber, Huber, Doherty, and Dowling 2013, With important exceptions to).

I, therefore, account for the many dimensions of each trait in testing the relationship with attitudes like political trust in paper two. I show that the lower levels of traits explain better the variation in political trust than higher categories. Moreover, the lower-level traits vary in the direction and magnitude of how they affect trust in government, which explains previous contradictory findings.

The last explanation relates to *under which circumstances* personality traits affect political trust. Personality traits may moderate the effect of contextual factors like the school system, media market, or political system on performance or attitudes (Mondak 2010; Freitag and Ackermann 2016). One crucial paper testing this interaction finds that personality traits moderate the effect of direct democracy on political trust (Freitag and Ackermann 2016). I argue that the most important contextual factor for personality traits regards how institutions perform, as this has been found to influence political trust in previous

studies (Rothstein 2011; Khan 2016). Moreover, corruption is the most cardinal obstacle to institutional performance worldwide.

There are also good reasons to expect personalities to react differently to corruption (Canache et al. 2019), for example, open individuals who value development and change or neurotic individuals respond more negatively to information about wrongdoings than other personality traits. It is, therefore, possible that personality traits condition the effect of corruption on political trust attitudes. I test this in paper three and show that most personality traits amplify the negative effect of bribery experience on political trust. I also show that all traits but conscientiousness affect selection into bribery experiences.

Thus, the dissertation tests *how and when personality traits affect political trust*. I achieve this by using a comparative approach and applying different methods and data on personalities and political trust.

In this dissertation, I contribute to the competing views on trust formation by showing that trust stems from individual personality traits and institutional behavior. Previous research has treated personality traits' effect on trust too bluntly, i.e., not considering how trust varies between institutions, how underlying traits of the personality categories matter, and how personal experiences of corrupt institutions play an important role.

In essence, I argue and show that there are several pathways for personalities to affect political trust attitudes, namely, personalities affecting attitudes, selection into experience, and how people process information and experiences with institutions. Moreover, I contribute to the literature on political trust by showing that people with different personality traits trust different institutions. Furthermore, I demonstrate that personality traits are more multifaceted than previously considered within political science. This means that people take institu-

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tions' performance into account, but personality affects how performance is evaluated. Lastly, I contribute to the corruption literature by showing that corruption experiences affect people with different personality traits differently.

When previous studies have summarized their findings, they have concluded that the effect of traits on trust is inconclusive or negligible (Bromme, Rothmund, and Azevedo 2022; Cawvey et al. 2018b). This dissertation brings light to this discussion by showing that personality traits matter for individuals' evaluations of institutions but that the effect is small. Furthermore, my findings imply that lower-order traits and institutional behavior shape political trust and are essential to include in studies on the effect of personality traits on other political attitudinal and behavioral outcomes than political trust.

As for my societal contribution, many societies want to maintain or increase political trust. However, I show that there is no one-size-fits-all type of political trust. Given that personality traits lead people to interpret information differently and to trust different institutions, we need to offer different paths to political trust to different people.

Moreover, the public debate centers around 'plummeting trust levels' with a strive to increase public trust. I have shown that personality traits shape political trust and that people do not always evaluate misconduct, such as corruption, in a way that reduces their political trust. While we cannot conduct personality tests on a large scale when policies are implemented or before people have interactions with institutions, this research contributes to explaining the puzzle of why people do not always react negatively to corruption. This has implications for anti-corruption efforts as we know that personality traits will lead people to interpret policies differently. Our focus should therefore be how to increase the extent to which perceptions of trustworthiness re-



flect how institutions perform. For example, if the police are performing well and can punish wrongdoing and ensure security impartially and transparently, then we want people to trust the police. Therefore, knowing how to increase the overlap between perceptions and institutional performance, despite our personality differences, is of the essence.

The remainder of the chapter begins with previous research and theory on personality traits and political trust and develops a theoretical model. The following section is a methodological discussion, followed by a discussion of the data used. Lastly, I provide an overview of the papers and conclude by describing my contribution to the literature.



## 2 Previous research and theory

This section discusses personality traits, how personality is measured, and the importance of personality traits for political science. I then describe the link between traits and political trust. I continue with two subsections discussing how individuals' corruption perceptions and corruptibility relates to personality traits. Finally, the last sections develop the theoretical model and pathways and clarify the research questions.

### 2.1 Our personality defines us

“... he was sunshine most always — I mean he made it seem like good weather.”

*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,*  
*Mark Twain (2010, 102)*

## 2 PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND THEORY

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Personalities are widely used descriptions and characterizations of individual differences. For example, we use personality terminology in everyday language to describe people around us as aggressive, shy, or egotistic. We find them in literature, for instance, in the application of epithets in Homers' *Illiad*, which depicted Archaens and Trojans as virtuous, brave, resourceful, or fearless (de Raad and Passakos 2009). Moreover, the quote above describes Colonel Grangerford as a person with a positive outlook on life. Other traits that have been central in literature are greed in *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, apathy in *The Stranger* by Albert Camus, and introverts are the main characters in *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë and *Poirot* by Agatha Christie.

Students of politics should not be surprised that Plato (427–349 BCE) seems to be the first scholar to develop a scheme of four personality traits needed for the ideal society: courage, justice, prudence, and temperance. The ideal types were further developed by his student Aristotle (384–322 BCE), who described personalities as a scale where it is possible to have a deficiency or excess of certain traits (de Raad and Mlačić 2017). These traits are still relevant, and the literature still perceives traits as a scale.

Since the ancient Greeks, we have continued to use traits to describe political leaders. For example, Louis the Do-Nothing for Louis V of France, Alexander the Kind for Alexandru of Moldavia, and Leopold V, Duke of Austria, has been called Leopold the Virtuous. But there are also modern examples of personality depictions in politics from the 2016 presidential election, where Hilary Clinton was frequently described as "aggressive," whereas Donald Trump was described as "narcissistic."

The study of personality was revived in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when Gordon Allport developed a scheme of authoritarian traits to describe rulers

(Allport 1929). This study categorizes individuals according to 'cardinal' traits that distinguish leaders, such as the need for fame or money, 'central' traits, such as honesty which all individuals to some extent possess and lastly, 'secondary' traits of a person's likes and dislikes which may be known only by a close friend. Similar descriptions are found in *The Prince* by Niccolò Machiavelli (1999), even though it is not explicitly conceptualized as personalities.

Nowadays, the personality trait literature does not only seek to describe authoritarian rulers but also people in general. Several researchers developed personality measurements in the latter half of the 1900s. Notably, the first attempt to measure personality through a questionnaire was developed to select recruits for the military (Cattell 1966). Personality has since become a core subfield within psychology.

While there is consensus that personality exists, there are several competing theories in the field. The core theories are the trait (also known as dispositional), psychodynamic, humanistic, biological, behaviorist, evolutionary, and social learning perspectives. They primarily differ in how stable personalities are and how they may develop over time. The disagreement within the field instead regards how to measure personality best.

### **2.1.1 How personality traits develop**

However, the development of the Big Five Framework revolutionized the study of personality. Since the 1990s, it has become the most widely studied and validated personality theory, which made it easier to integrate personality traits into other studies and disciplines (Mondak 2010). The Big Five is a trait theory arguing that personalities are relatively stable dispositions. Trait research is based on four assumptions: "(a) personality traits exist and are measurable, (b) these traits

## 2 PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND THEORY

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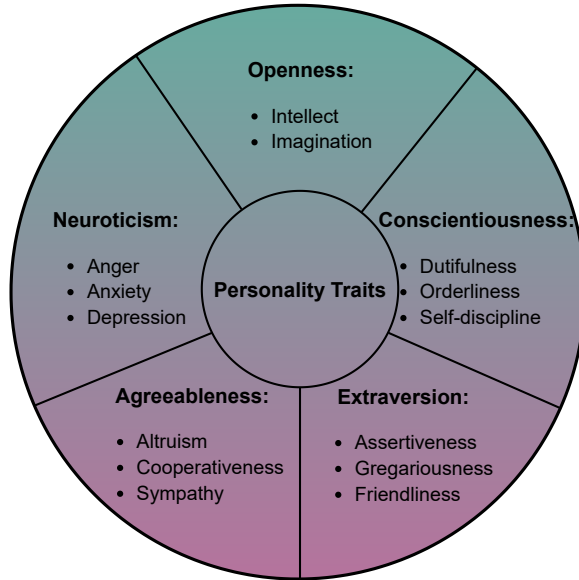
vary across individuals, (c) the causes of human behavior are rooted within the individual (e.g., personality traits affect individual behavior), and (d) people have perceptions about themselves and others” (McCrae and Costa Jr. 2008; Gerber et al. 2011, 266).

The Big Five trait domains were developed using a natural language approach with adjectives describing individuals’ attributes, such as anxious or artistic. The natural language approach relies on the fourth assumption that people understand themselves and others. Languages are thought to have developed so that only the words describing essential individual differences remain (Allport and Odbert 1936; John, Naumann, and Soto 2008). Data was collected by asking individuals to rate how a long list of adjectives relates to them. The answers were subsequently analyzed through scaling and dimensionality to identify the latent personality traits where five higher-order factors were found.

The Big Five framework, therefore, argues that most differences in personalities can be characterized by five domains; openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (or emotional stability) (See Figure 1). Each higher-order factor, also known as domain, has a continuum from low to high, where individuals are scored. Most individuals receive average scores, but some have trait scores close to the endpoints (See Table 1 for a description of the endpoints).

Researchers have shown that traits are genetically heritable (Hiraishi et al. 2008; Oskarsson et al. 2012; Eysenck and Prell 1951; Jang et al. 1998; Mõttus et al. 2019), based on early childhood socialization (Hogan and Ones 1997), change moderately over a lifetime and are distinct from values and ideology (Funk et al. 2013; Roccas et al. 2002). Moreover, these five traits are also relatively stable in cross-country

Figure 1: The higher and lower order personality traits



analyses (Caspi, Roberts, and Shiner 2005; Kajonius and Giolla 2017).

Personality traits are related to biological factors. For example, genetic markers are associated with the Big Five. While genes explain approximately 50 percent of the variation in extraversion (Mondak, Hayes, and Canache 2017), associations have also been found between four Big Five domains and the size of theoretically important brain parts. Notably, the lateral prefrontal cortex has a larger volume among highly conscientious individuals, and this part of the brain is vital for planning and impulse control (DeYoung et al. 2010).

Nonetheless, recent longitudinal studies have found that personality traits and attitudes change slightly over time (Osborne and Sibley

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Table 1: Overview of personality traits

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<b>Trait</b>	<b>Low scores</b>	<b>High scores</b>
<b>Openness</b>	Practical, Conventional	Intellectual curiosity, Creative
<b>Conscientiousness</b>	Disorganized, Impulsive	Organized, Productive
<b>Extraversion</b>	Reserved, Shy	Sociable, Assertive
<b>Agreeableness</b>	Uncooperative, Egotistical	Cooperative, Altruistic
<b>Emotional stability</b>	Temperamental	Relaxed, Emotionally stable

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2020). Whether personalities are stable or change has important implications for causality (Möttus 2016). For example, earlier studies forcefully argued that personality traits precede trust attitudes, which is a strong causal claim. Yet, it is clear that personality traits change to some extent over a lifetime. This is why traits are *relatively* stable. Nevertheless, most trait psychologists contend that traits change moderately, especially during a life-cycle (Eysenck and Prell 1951). Especially formative moments during a person's life, which can change their personality after having children or going through therapy.

That said, personality traits are more exogenous to trust formation than other individual-level variables such as ideology, partisanship, or education. The main strength is that a large part of the traits have a genetic base and that early childhood socialization is important for the remainder of the variation in personality (Möttus 2016). Many contemporary papers state that their design cannot test causality, but their conclusions suggest causation is implied. I, therefore, refrain from making strict causal claims while at the same time arguing that any associations between traits and outcomes after adolescence should be taken seriously. For example, personality may have a causal effect on outcomes such as political trust, even if it changes later in life. It only makes it



more difficult to study.

In conclusion, the main critique against traits is that situations determine actions and that individuals are not coherent actors. Today the personality debate seems settled that individuals sometimes act uncharacteristically but that the underlying characteristics seem stable. For example, a talkative person might not talk in every situation. Still, they tend to be talkative when they are young and older (Fleeson 2004).

### **2.1.2 Why study personality traits in political science**

While personality traits have been studied for a long time in psychology, the relationship between personality traits and political attitudes and beliefs has recently garnered increasing interest in political science and economics. In the early work by Mondak and Halperin (2008, 361), they concluded that "[o]ne of the Big Five factors mattered for every aspect of citizen politics we considered – political attitudes and predispositions, political behaviour and exposure to political information."

Since then, personality traits have been found to influence political participation, ideology, and trust in peers and institutions (Bakker and Lelkes 2018; Bloeser et al. 2015; Dinesen, Nørgaard, and Klemmensen 2014; Freitag and Ackermann 2016; Gerber, Huber, Doherty, Dowling, and Panagopoulos 2013; Mondak and Halperin 2008; Lindell and Strandberg 2018). As personality affects all aspects of life and how we react to daily challenges, it is plausible that personality traits also affect how we evaluate the trustworthiness of institutions.

The benefit of the Big Five is that researchers do not have to make their own personality theories and instruments to capture individual differences. For example, Mondak and Halperin (2008, 361) argued

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that "as a discipline, we suffer a setback in our ability to generalize or relate findings to other contexts" if we do not have a systematic and consistent instrument to measure personality traits.

More than a decade later, it is questionable if this promise has been fulfilled. Previous research on personality traits within political science has relied on many personality scales, of which most are short, and this can result in researchers drawing hasty conclusions. For example, previous research has concluded that personality traits have a limited and negligible effect on political attitudes and behavior since results vary and have small effect sizes (Gerber et al. 2011). But it is also possible that differences in directions of effects are at least in part driven by the measurement and that these personality traits indeed affect political trust. In the next section, I explain how to better align theory, concepts, and measurement of personality traits.

### **2.1.3 The relationship between personality traits and political trust**

Findings from previous research show that some traits, such as agreeableness and emotional stability, matter more for political trust than others (Bromme, Rothmund, and Azevedo 2022; Vitriol, Larsen, and Ludeke 2019). For example, it is easy to imagine that a neurotic individual with an anxious disposition and depressive thoughts would have lower trust in institutions than someone emotionally stable. We can also imagine an agreeable, friendly, sympathetic individual having higher trust in institutions than selfish and quarrelsome individuals. Yet the remaining traits, openness, conscientiousness, and extraversion, are positively, negatively, or unrelated to political trust.

I summarize the findings from previous research in Table 2. Two patterns are visible in the overview. First, the effect of personality

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traits varies within dependent variables. For example, negative, positive, or no relationships are found for openness, even when dependent variables are separated into trust in politicians and trust in institutions. This could indicate that the division of dependent variables has been unsatisfactory. There are many types of political institutions, such as governments, parliaments, political parties, courts, and the police, to name a few, and it is plausible that individuals may trust the police rather than the government or vice versa.

Second, there is a surprising variation both within and between countries. For example, extraversion is negatively related to trust in Latin American politicians and institutions but seems unrelated to political trust in the US. For example, the variation within countries is visible in Switzerland and the Netherlands. This variation requires a theoretical and empirical exploration of potential drivers by differentiation of conceptualization in the dependent and independent variables as well as an exploration of contextual factors.

But contradictory findings should not be utterly unexpected. Previous literature has argued that there are also theoretical reasons to expect openness, conscientiousness, and extraversion to be negatively related and positively related to political trust. First, the Big Five model conceptualizes traits as hierarchical. Previous literature has, for example, used the lower levels of the personality hierarchy to develop expectations for how traits affect political attitudes and behavior. For example, lower categories like cautiousness were expected to inhibit conscientious individuals from political engagement, while the anger facet instead drives neurotic individuals to act (Bromme, Rothmund, and Azevedo 2022).

Moreover, agreeableness comprises friendliness, care for others, and conflict avoidance, whereas openness includes a vivid imagina-

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tion, artistic interests, and wanting to change the status quo. So, two people can score as high on the same trait, but one might have a more vivid imagination, and the other will have more artistic interests. Will the lower categories of the same trait have a similar or different relationship with political trust? Thus, in my second study, I explore the effect of lower-level categories within a trait on political trust, effectively exploring a reason for the variation in previous research.

In conclusion, there are reasons to believe that openness, conscientiousness, and extraversion have both increasing and suppressing effects on the lower categories. For example, conscientiousness contains the lower category, cautiousness, which should lead to lower trust, and another category, dutifulness, which should lead to higher political trust. These expectations help explain the contradictory relationship between these traits and political trust. Moreover, the lower categories can also explain the consistent findings for agreeableness, emotional stability, and political trust. For example, the lower categories within neuroticism (the inverse of emotional stability), like anxiety, volatile emotions, and anger, are negative for trust, which explains why this trait is continuously negatively related to political trust.

Table 2: Previous research has found no robust evidence that traits matter for political trust

Study	Big Five Estimates						No. items	N	Sample	Analysis
	O	C	E	A	EM	Model			Country	Estimation
<b>Trust in institutions</b>										
Vitriol et al. 2019	-	+	-	+	+	§	n/a	6595	§	Meta-analysis
Bromme et al. 2022	0	0	0	0	+	BFI-S	15	988	Germany	SEM
Caprara et al. 2017	+	+	+	+	+	n/a	n/a	534	Italy	Correlation
Bakker et al. 2016	0	+	0	0	0	Mini-IPIP	20	1174	Netherlands	OLS
Vitriol et al. 2019	+	+	+	+	+	IPIP	50	5537	Netherlands	OLS
Mondak et al. 2017	-	0/+	-	+	+	TIPI	10	35162	Latin America	MFE
Vitriol et al. 2019	-	+	-	+	+	TIPI	10	35440	Latin America	OLS
Freitag et al. 2016	0	0	-	0	+	BFI-S	15	1094	Switzerland	MFE
Vitriol et al. 2019	+	0	+	+	+	BFI-S	15	7223	Switzerland	OLS
Vitriol et al. 2019	0	0	0	+	+	BFI-10	10	6763	Switzerland	OLS
Cawvey et al. 2018b	-	-	0	0	+	TIPI	10	540	USA	OLS
Vitriol et al. 2019	0	0	0	0	+	TIPI	10	5468	USA	OLS
<b>Trust in politicians</b>										
Bromme et al. 2022	+	-/+	+	-/+	+	BFI-S	15	730~	Germany	SEM
Vitriol et al. 2019	-	+	+	+	+	TIPI	10	29484	Great Britain	OLS
Anderson 2010	-	0	0	+	0	BFI	21	635	USA	Ordered Logit
Mondak et al. 2008	-	0	0	+	0	BFI	21	793	USA	Ordered Logit
Vitriol et al. 2019	+	+	0	0	0	TIPI	10	3573	USA	OLS

Note: O = Openness, C = Conscientiousness, Ex = Extraversion, A = Agreeableness, EM = Emotional stability. § the meta-analysis includes each dataset from Vitriol, Larsen, and Ludeke (2019) reported in this table. MFE = Multilevel Fixed effects. OLS = Ordinary Least Squares Regression. SEM = Structural Equation Modelling. Effects are coded "-" if  $p < .05$ , "0" if  $p > .05$ , and "+" if  $p < .05$ , where results varied between models, it is coded as -/+ or 0/+.

### **2.2 Political trust – a stepping stone to political accountability?**

Having clarified the concept and measurements of personality traits, I now move on to discuss political trust.

#### **2.2.1 Why high levels of political trust are desirable**

In the aftermath of political scandals, economic, and social crises, several scholars have observed a reduction in political trust (Torcal and Christmann 2021; van Erkel and van der Meer 2016; Kumlin and Haugsgjerd 2017). Yet, the interest in understanding political trust and what causes it is not new. The last 50 years have seen a surge in newspaper headlines on the decline in political trust in established democracies (Hetherington 2005). Moreover, there is equal interest in building trust in societies now lacking it. But we can also imagine the importance of trust through a historical lens. When societies grow large enough, it is not possible to know every group member. Therefore, a division of labor and a representative system arises, rendering some form of political trust necessary. For example, individuals must rely on distant group members to perform specific tasks like ensuring defense, shelter, and food supplies.

If societies are to increase political trust and unlock the benefits associated with it, such as higher political participation, tax compliance, rule-abiding citizenry, GDP growth, and capacity to solve collective action problems (Scholz and Lubell 1998; Marien and Hooghe 2011; Stockemer, LaMontagne, and Scruggs 2013), it is paramount that research explains what makes individuals trust institutions and what changes how they trust.

It is, therefore, unsurprising that this is a central question in the so-

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cial sciences as well, not the least in political science (Putnam 1993; Dalton 2004; Norris 1999). The literature on political trust usually uncritically associates the existence of high political trust with an array of desirable political outcomes. On the societal level, political trust is associated with higher rule compliance, higher GDP, functioning democracy, good government, and higher capacity to solve collective action problems (Knack 2002; Sønderskov 2009; Tavits 2006).

Individuals who trust that the political and legal system is committed, competent, and effective enough to implement political decisions are the ones who ensure that policies are enacted. Therefore, a reservoir of highly trusting individuals is commonly described as the glue that keeps the system together (Zmerli and van der Meer 2017b). We can also think of high political trust as a factor that makes societies more prepared or resilient to crises when they happen (See overview in Donahue, Eckel, and Wilson 2014). This has been evident during the SARS Cov-2 Pandemic. People follow the restrictions to a greater extent, and the state may also trust its citizens to follow the rules (Harring, Jagers, and Löfgren 2021; Schmeisser, Renström, and Bäck 2021).

However, the political trust literature does not only describe highly trusting societies in rosy terms as there are also several positive outcomes at the individual level. For example, individuals who trust public institutions are also known to exhibit higher levels of social trust (Rothstein and Stolle 2008; Spadaro et al. 2020; Sønderskov and Dinesen 2016) and pro-social behavior such as charitable giving, engagement in voluntary associations, as well as voting in elections (Uslaner 2002).

### 2.2.2 Political trust as a mechanism for political action

While high trust is desirable, societies also benefit from critical citizens since they are more likely to identify flaws in the system and engage politically to solve them (Norris 1999; Dalton 2004). In short, trust is not a virtue. Societies may therefore benefit from mistrust in situations where misconduct like corruption becomes evident. In this situation, mistrust is the most rational response. But observing corruption and low-functioning institutions does not have to trigger engagement (Stockemer, LaMontagne, and Scruggs 2013; Letki, Górecki, and Gendźwił 2022; Gabriel 2017).

Previous research has shown that low trust in public institutions is standard worldwide. Still, more surprising is that this has yet to lead citizens to engage in collective action to correct governments and other institutions. Citizens are critical - but they do not 'throw the rascals out,' for example, when politicians are corrupt (de Sousa and Moriconi 2013; Pavão 2018). A common explanation is that this counterintuitive finding is partially based on people being satisfied with their lives and having low expectations for what politics can do. Instead, people hold governments accountable for economic performance, maintaining peace, and political integrity (Torcal and Christmann 2021; van Erkel and van der Meer 2016). While the government does steer economic policy, many economic outcomes are outside the reach of political leaders and depend on the global market, meaning that politicians are counterintuitively held accountable for the things that are out of their control (Craig 2021).

Low trust can therefore be a response to the low performance of institutions, but it is also possible to imagine that people's expectations for performance are too high. "[E]ither way low trust tells us that something is wrong" (Newton 2001, 205). Mistrust is, therefore, not



a problem at the individual level but can become a problem when it aggregates on a societal level. For societies, the consequences might be lower political engagement leading to a downward spiral of institutional performance. Hence there is a balance point of political trust that is desirable.

Since these outcomes can make or break a society, politicians, organizations, governments, and academics are interested in understanding how political trust is built. Knowing what effect trust has in society is of utmost importance; therefore, it is unsurprising that the academic literature has spent much time charting this. Political trust is often used as an independent variable to describe outcomes like political participation or GDP. But there is still unexplained variance in political trust remaining to be chartered, and gaining this knowledge can help us design policies to achieve the desired outcomes reported above.

### **2.2.3 Defining political trust**

Most citizens interact with many political actors and institutions during their lifetime, which can help or harm them. Political trust has therefore been defined as the belief that political actors and institutions will not do them harm (Levi and Stoker 2000). In this case, harm does not mean that institutions must make decisions in an individual's favor but instead focus on institutions not actively maltreating or extorting them. Thus, trusting others and institutions is often considered a risk, and being involved with institutions provides different risks given the task, institution, or individual characteristics. For example, comparing applying for a permit or competing for a public tender, the fees may be accurate, but it might also entail overpayment for these services.

What speaks in favor of individuals continuously evaluating institutional performance and updating their beliefs is that political trust

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varies between countries and individuals living in the same country over time. As a result, I define political trust as an expectation and not a behavior (e.g., Hardin 2002). Including individuals' actions would conflate trust with cooperative behavior, which would lead to problems if we are to use political trust to predict behavioral outcomes (cf. Bauer and Freitag 2017; Fehr et al. 2002).

This dissertation focus on a vertical form of trust; trust in political institutions, which is different from generalized trust. Generalized trust, by contrast, regards trust in other people and entails some form of risk. What is different is the power dimension between political institutions and the general public.

So how do individuals form their political trust attitudes? There are two schools within political trust, relational and unidimensional. The unidimensional approach suggests that individuals make a combined trust assessment of government agents and bodies, such as the government, the police, or the courts. Yet, adherents of this perspective often make an argument that I think clashes with their core assumption; that institutions are similar. the argument is that some institutions are stepping stones for developing trust in other institutions. Most commonly, implementing institutions, which affect our day-to-day life and are also the institutions we are most likely to have first-hand experience with, train us to trust other institutions, which we learn about more indirectly, like government actions through the media. As the expectations clash, it is unsurprising that the evidence for the unidimensional approach is mixed at best (See van der Meer and Hakhverdian (2017)).

By contrast, from the relational perspective, trust stems from substantial experience with specific institutions and their employees. When experiencing fair and impartial treatment, individuals begin to trust institutions and their capacity to perform (Marien and Werner 2019;

Grimes 2017). Individuals focus their trust on the output of the political system and on the overall quality and performance of institutions in assuring wealth and health. It can be formalized as Person A trusting Institution B to do C at time T (Bauer and Freitag 2017). The subject is the individual choosing whether to trust, and the object is the political institution that is either trusted or not. C is the evaluation of how well an institution performs, and T is the time point they are trusted, which entails that trust can change.

I argue that there are two primary reasons that speak in favor of the relational perspective of political trust. First, the assumption is that people continually update their expectations of institutions. Therefore, suppose that an individual observes misconduct within the police, it does not have to lead to lower trust in the courts. This conceptual clarity renders its measurement straightforward – individuals' trust in institutions should be studied one institution at a time.

The second reason is empirical, where previous studies have found that governments are the highest trusted in Chile and Argentina but are awarded the lowest levels of trust in Europe. By contrast, political parties tend to be the least trusted institutions, but in Colombia and Mexico, the civil service is trusted even less (van der Meer and Ouattara 2019). In conclusion, an individual may trust the police but not the parliament. This perspective enjoys the highest support in the literature (Schneider 2017).

Yet there is one caveat, the general trend is that representative institutions – the government, parliament, and political parties are trusted less than implementing institutions – the civil service, the courts, and the police (van der Meer and Ouattara 2019). Because of this division, previous work has sometimes referred to trust in implementing institutions as institutional trust, whereas trust in representative institutions

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is called political trust. According to this position, political trust has a narrow definition, which only includes politically appointed positions like parties and local and national parliaments (cf. van der Meer and Ouattara 2019; Fisher, Van Heerde, and Tucker 2010).

However, I believe there are two reasons to make a wide conceptualization of political institutions and to refer to this as political trust. First, the level of political appointment of the bureaucracy varies greatly worldwide, making the separation between political institutions and implementing institutions unclear between countries. The second argument is that a wide definition of political trust as trust in parties, civil service, courts, judges, police, and local and national parliaments can be used while still studying trust in each separate institution.

### **2.3 What makes people trust institutions**

That individuals differ in the extent to which they trust government actors and institutions has been given attention from different fields within political science. For example, the literature on comparative politics has contributed with the knowledge that the extent to which individuals trust institutions varies greatly between countries where countries like Afghanistan have low political trust, whereas Nordic countries have higher political trust (Zmerli and Newton 2017). Unsurprisingly, people living in countries with higher levels of corruption have lower trust in institutions compared to those living in countries with

well-functioning public institutions (Khan 2016; Rothstein 2011).<sup>1</sup>

While perceptions of performance, accountability, corruption, and impartiality affect trust attitudes, how closely related these perceptions are to actual performance is less clear (van der Meer and Hakhverdian 2017). If personality traits greatly affect trust formation, this would suggest that the connection between perceptions of performance and actual performance is more distant than previously thought.

But context is not all. There are attitudinal differences between individuals in the same country. The public opinion literature has found several individual-level explanations for trusting attitudes. For example, on average, women have higher political trust than men, political trust tends to diminish with age, and the highly educated often have higher political trust compared to the less educated (Hakhverdian and Mayne 2012; Torcal and Christmann 2021; Bunting, Gaskell, and Stoker 2021; Dalton 2004; Hetherington 2005). Previous research has also found that people supporting the incumbent at a given point tend to have higher trust in the government. Moreover, people with positive experiences of government interactions have higher trust than those with negative experiences (Kumlin and Haugsgjerd 2017; Kumlin 2004).

In conclusion, political trust does not necessarily indicate that citizens will demand accountability. Yet it is an important signal that something is wrong. Lastly, considering the findings from previous research,

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1. Other contextual factors contributing to individual differences are the culture or socialization that individuals grow up in (Mishler and Rose 2001; Letki 2006; Spadaro et al. 2020).

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people evaluate institutions independently, and thus research on political trust should study one institution at a time.

### 2.3.1 Corruption experience

So far, I have discussed the expected direct effects of personality traits on political outcomes. But contextual factors are often highlighted in the literature to affect the relationship between personality, attitudes, and behavior. For example, contextual factors that could affect the relationship between personality traits and trust are the political system (Freitag and Ackermann 2016), institutional performance (Rothstein 2011; Mishler and Rose 2001; Tavits 2006), political culture (Gerber et al. 2011; Mondak et al. 2010; Almond and Verba 1963), or the performance of the economy (Hetherington 1998). All these contextual factors have been found to affect political trust.

In a study of political systems, Freitag and Ackermann (2016) found that personality traits significantly moderated the effect of direct democracy on political trust. For example, highly agreeable individuals were shown to have lower trust in political institutions in Swiss cantons with higher numbers of direct democratic events. Another test of a person-situation interaction found that the perceived tone of an election campaign is conditioned by both extraversion and openness towards electoral participation (Mondak et al. 2010).

However, in the case of political trust, the most plausible contextual factor is how well institutions perform. First, the level of corruption is often claimed to circumvent the functioning of institutions. Second, a large body of research acknowledges that trust is lower in highly corrupt countries. In contrast, countries where institutions perform better, as measured by the absence of corruption, enjoy higher trust levels (Khan 2016; Rothstein 2011). Furthermore, when political corruption

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is uncovered among public officials, political trust tends to decrease (della Porta 2000; Pharr 2000; Uslaner 2002; Torcal and Christmann 2021).

Corruption is often argued to be a breach of public trust as it undermines or negates how fairly political institutions operate. Moreover, corruption has proven to be surprisingly lasting, and no country has rid itself of corruption in political institutions (Rothstein 2011). In essence, corruption restrains institutions in autocratic states and developed democracies (Charron, Dijkstra, and Lapuente 2015; Warren 2004; Torcal and Christmann 2021).

A generally accepted definition states that corruption is "the abuse of entrusted power for personal benefit" (Transparency International 2022; Mungiu-Pippidi and Fazekas 2020). However, transparency International also defines corruption as something which "(...) can happen anywhere: in business, government, the courts, the media, and in civil society, as well as across all sectors from health and education to infrastructure and sports." (Transparency International 2022) As this dissertation is interested in the outcome of trust in political actors and institutions, I have also chosen a narrow focus on corruption which political actors and institutions practice, thus excluding corruption in the private sector.

Now that it is clear who can engage in corruption, I must define what constitutes a corrupt act. Examples include when politicians or civil servants require or accept payment or favors for services, misuse finances, and give jobs to friends, families, or acquaintances (Transparency International 2022).

Individuals can experience corruption in two ways. First, many political scandals regard corruption, and people access this information through the media or acquaintances. But people can experience cor-

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ruption firsthand when voting or applying for licenses and permits. For example, about 20 percent of respondents in a Mexican study say that they have experienced corruption (Bailey and Paras 2006). As I mentioned in Section 2.2, it is crucial for citizens to detect political corruption and translate these perceptions into evaluations of institutions for political accountability to function in practice.

Canache et al. (2019) makes the case that individuals' personality affects their prior perceptions of institutional performance and, in turn, how they react to new information. "[S]uppose, it is widely known that 30 per cent of officials in a country have been caught taking bribes. People who were shocked by this information may label corruption as very common. Conversely, for respondents who previously were convinced that all officials are corrupt, evidence that only 30 per cent take bribes might be modestly good news, leading to the conclusion that corruption is uncommon." Based on this, one might imagine people's different personality traits affect their interpretation and subsequent reaction to corruption, shaping their trust evaluations in the same institutions.

Individuals do not agree about how widespread corruption is, which can be due to individuals disagreeing *what* they considered corrupt activities to be (Seligson 2002). However, accepting or requesting bribes is what most people think a corrupt activity is across contexts in previous studies (Redlawsk and McCann 2005; Bailey and Paras 2006). While bribery is not a contextual factor, I argue it can be used as a proxy for context. Moreover, it is a clear example of a situation individuals may experience when interacting with public institutions.

To effectively combat something so persistent as corruption, learning how individuals interpret corruption and how corruption affects judgments of the trustworthiness of institutions should improve the



prospects for accountability and governance.

### **2.3.2 Personality traits and corruptibility**

But there are also insights on how personality traits relate to corrupt activities from the psychology literature. Canache et al. (2019) and Connelly and Ones (2008) studied the relationship between personality traits and corruption, finding that personality traits are related to perceptions of corruption on a local and national level, even under control for GDP and culture. Moreover, people scoring high on extraversion and conscientiousness were found to be more likely to participate in corrupt activities. Still, meticulous individuals, a lower conscientiousness category, were less likely to engage in corruption (Agbo and Iwundu 2016). But other personality concepts than the Big Five, such as honesty-humility, narcissism, and psychopathy, have also been tied to corruptibility (Julián and Bonavia 2020). However, these studies treat corruption as the outcome rather than a moderating factor, thus, motivating my question on how personality traits and corruption interact in shaping political trust.

While there is a plausible argument for the link between personality traits, corruption, and trust in its own right, it can also help explain the contradictory findings observed between traits and political trust.

Furthermore, one reason the person-situation interactions have been overlooked in political science is the lack of data on personality combined with variation in context (Freitag and Ackermann 2016).

Now that I have clarified why individuals may evaluate institutional performance differently and that personality traits are multidimensional, the next section develops the theoretical argument and mechanisms for how personality traits matter for political trust formation and which type of corruption is vital for trust evaluations.

### 2.4 Theoretical model

One analogy that can explain personality is "emotions are to personality as weather is to climate" (Revelle 2003). Weather lasts for hours up to tens of hours, weather systems last for days, whereas climate is how the weather is characterized over years. Emotions or affects are fleeting, quick assessments and responses to stimuli. A mood, on the other hand, is a positive or negative affective state, such as happy or sad, and is less intense than an emotion but last longer. Personality, in turn, comprises the emotions a person exhibits over years (Ziegler 2010; Vallverdú and Trovato 2016). Consequently, a person with a neurotic personality is often in a state of negative affect where they feel nervous or anxious. Of course, they, too, can experience happiness and joy, but it is rare for a neurotic person compared to someone emotionally stable.

Returning to the weather analogy, "[j]ust as temperature is an inadequate measure of weather, and average temperature an inadequate measure of climate, so is average affect an incomplete measure of personality" (Revelle 2003). Personality is a broad concept defined as an "individual's unique adjustment to life, including major traits, interests, drives, values, self-concept, abilities, and emotional patterns." (*Personality*, no date). While there are many personality theories, personality traits are the most common way to conceptualize and measure personality. The first benefit of conceptualizing personality as personality traits is that personality traits describe a substantial amount of the behavioral, cognitive, affective, and motivational dispositions between individuals (Wilt and Revelle 2015).

The second benefit of the personality trait model is that the literature has established that traits develop both from genetics and from so-

cial learning. For example, an individual's conscientiousness depends on a genetic predisposition, but it also concerns how they are socialized to develop attitudes toward authorities through interactions with parents, peers, and teachers (Hogan and Ones 1997, 854).

The third benefit also regards how traits develop, i.e., personality traits being established early in life and affecting later attitudes and behavior. If personality traits are fluid and change dramatically over a lifetime, then it would be possible that personality is caused by interactions with others and interactions with institutions and not the other way around. But this is less likely in this case since personality traits largely develop before people receive information about institutions and when institutional interactions take place (Mondak 2010, 36–37). Lastly, as I discussed in Section 2.1.1, personality traits are likely a causal factor preceding political outcomes as well (Möttus 2016).<sup>2</sup>

As there are benefits of conceptualizing personality as personality traits, I will discuss the strengths of using personality traits to explain variation in political trust. The first clue can be found in the definition of the Big Five traits. For example, agreeable people who are warm, sympathetic, and trusting others or neurotic individuals who are temperamental, anxious, and angry are likely to exhibit different levels of trust in institutions.

Second, personality traits precede or are highly correlated with several psychological mechanisms that could be important for political trust, such as acceptance of authority, need for cognition, emotion reg-

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2. However, several factors may cloud the relationship between traits and political trust, I discuss this further in Section 3.1.

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ulation, risk aversion, values, and norms (Sadowski and Coghburn 1997; Parks-Leduc, Feldman, and Bardi 2015; Carlo et al. 2005; Nicholson et al. 2005; Deck et al. 2008). For example, acceptance of authority and the need for cognition are other personality theories but are narrower definitions of personality. The benefit of the Big Five is that it takes a multitude of personality factors into account simultaneously. This is especially important since one personality factor does not exist in a vacuum, i.e., people have a certain level of conscientiousness and neuroticism. Another example is risk aversion, which is a preference guided by personality and could be a mechanism linking personality traits to political trust. In the next section, I develop the theoretical pathways linking personality traits to trust.

### **2.4.1 The pathways linking personality traits and political trust**

In this dissertation, I argue that there are three pathways linking personality traits to political trust. The pathways are developed from standard approaches in the personality trait literature; first, that traits can have a direct effect on attitudinal outcomes. Second, personality traits may moderate the effect of information and experience on political trust. Third, information and experience may mediate the effect of personality traits on political trust. I have consequently adapted these pathways to the study of political trust attitudes. In Figure 2, I give an overview of the three pathways and will discuss them one at a time.

#### **Pathway 1: The direct effect of personality traits on political trust**

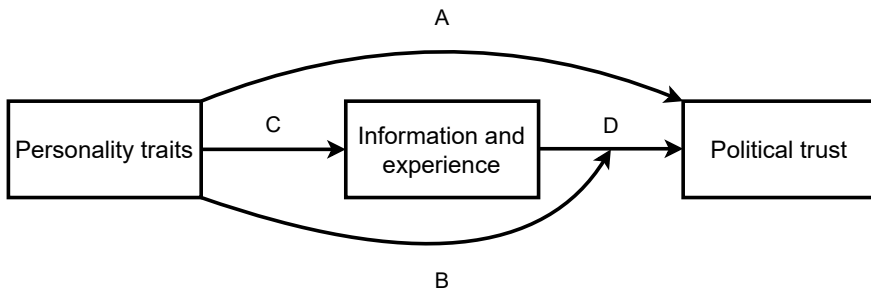
In the first pathway, I argue that personality traits may have a direct effect on political trust (visualized as arrow A in Figure 2). As personality traits capture our general perspective on the world around us. For example, traits include our affect if we are generally optimistic, cynical,

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or anxious. Picture, for example, an agreeable person who is warm and sympathetic, in other words, they have positive feelings towards others. Consequently, they may have positive feelings towards people in government and institutions. But, highly agreeable people dislike conflicts, and since this is a core element of party politics, they may trust political institutions less. I, therefore, argue that as people rarely interact with central government or national institutions, it is plausible that people fall back on their personality traits in making judgments about political institutions. Another example is extraverts, who want to build relationships above all but cannot build relationships due to the distance to national political institutions such as the parliament, political parties, and the government. One last example is that highly open individuals are critical thinkers and question the status quo. Therefore, it is possible that as personality traits capture our general perspectives on the world, they, therefore, affect our assessment of the trustworthiness of political actors and institutions (See arrow A).

Figure 2: Theoretical model of the effect of personality traits on political trust



### **Pathway 2: The moderating effect of personality traits on the relationship between information and experiences and political trust**

For the second pathway, I argue that personality traits *moderate* the effect of information and experience with institutions on political trust (See arrow B in Figure 2). This pathway builds on findings in the personality trait literature which show that personality traits affect how individuals process and interpret information (Mondak 2010). For example, suppose a positive and outgoing or cynical and temperamental person reads the same article about misconduct within the government, their affect likely differs and the extent to which the article changes this person's attitudes may differ.

But, individuals do not only get information by reading about political institutions, they also consider their own experiences as informational cues. For example, people experience institutions when they vote, apply for licenses, and use public services, which have been found to change trust attitudes depending on whether they are treated fairly. I, therefore, argue that people with different personality traits interpret experiences differently, affecting how experiences translate into trust attitudes. In this case, an example could be a highly conscientious individual who has respect for authorities and follows rules but who experiences institutional malfeasance like corruption. As a consequence, the highly conscientious might reduce their trust in authorities more than their more laid-back counterparts.

Since personality traits are established at an early age, before receiving information or when interactions with political institutions have taken place, it is possible that personality traits are the way in which individuals interpret information and experiences later in life. The pathway showing how personality traits can *moderate* the relationship be-

tween information and experience and political trust is visualized by arrow B in Figure 2 of the theoretical model

### **Pathway 3: The mediating effect of selection on the relationship between personality traits and political trust**

The third and final pathway state that the effect of personality traits on political trust is *mediated* by information and experiences as is visualized in arrow C and D in Figure 2. I am building an argument based on research showing that some individuals are more exposed to negative treatment by authorities (Cawvey et al. 2018a). More specifically, I argue that personality traits may affect the information they seek and the selection into experiences with institutions (See arrow B in Figure 2). Imagine a confrontational and angry person. They might be exposed to different interactions with institutions that someone who is friendly and calm is unlikely to experience. One example is a person with an extraverted personality, they are social and move around in society and may therefore be stopped at more random vehicle inspections than others. They are also argumentative and assertive and may therefore get into arguments with authorities. By having these negative experiences, these individuals should therefore be less trusting of political actors and institutions.

To summarize, the overall research question this dissertation seeks to answer is *how and when do personality traits affect political trust?* What I have argued in this section is that personalities may affect trust attitudes directly through our perspectives on the world or indirectly through how we process information and experiences or select into experiences with institutions. To know which of these pathways has merits, I pose three research questions in the next section that I address in the articles.

### 2.4.2 Research questions

In the first paper, I test the total effect of personality traits on political trust. As this paper does an overarching test of the total effect, the paper does not aim to test the pathways, but rather to establish whether there is a relationship between personality traits and political trust (See Figure 2). Nevertheless, this paper builds on previous research which has made contradictory findings regarding the relationship between personality traits and political trust. One explanation for the inconclusive result could stem from the conceptualization of political trust as one unidimensional construct. I base my argument on previous findings in the literature on political trust which has established that individuals evaluate one institution at a time and bestow different levels of trust in them. As a consequence, the previous contradictory findings between traits and political trust may be clarified if political trust is disaggregated. I, therefore, ask:

*Is there a relationship between personality traits and political trust, and if so, does it depend on the institution?*

The second paper also focuses on the overall effect of personality on political trust and does not disentangle if the effect is direct or indirect (See Figure 2). The background of the paper rest on the fact that much of the theorizing about the effect of personality traits on a particular outcome is developed using subcategories of the overarching Big Five personality traits. Scholars have argued that the subcategories of each trait can make them more or less trusting of political actors and institutions. While testing the effect of subcategories in psychology is more common, it needs to be used more in the political science literature on personality traits. Moreover, using the lower categories may be fruitful since political science theory, for example, expects aspects



of conscientiousness to make them more or less trusting (Cawvey et al. 2018b). If empirical testing instead disaggregated personality traits, there is a possibility that variations within each personality trait explain the contradictory findings between personality traits and political trust. The second question for the dissertation is, therefore:

*Do lower categories of personality traits explain variation in political trust better than higher categories?*

The third paper focuses on testing whether the effect of personality traits on political trust is mediated or moderated by information and experiences. The pathways are visualized by arrow B, C, and D in Figure 2. The moderation argument is that people with different personality traits may interpret experiences or information on institutional performance differently, which affects political trust. By contrast, the mediation argument is that personality traits may affect how people seek information and select into experiences, which affects political trust.

People are reached by messages on institutional performance in three ways — first, their own experiences and interactions with public institutions. The second is through conversations with friends and family. And third, through the media. The third paper focuses on how experiences people have with corrupt institutions moderate or mediate the relationship between traits and political trust.

However, previous studies testing the link between corruption and trust have usually suffered from measuring corruption through perceptions of corruption. Therefore, it has been difficult to establish causality since highly trusting individuals might perceive corruption to be uncommon, or vice versa; people who perceive corruption to be uncommon might therefore state that they trust institutions (Canache et al. 2019; Seligson 2002). In conclusion, asking people about personal

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corruption experiences and political trust attitudes means that this bias can be reduced.

Using experiences with corruption can also be helpful as individuals rely on experiences as a heuristic to evaluate their surroundings and how to behave as a response (Canache et al. 2019). The third and final research question is thus:

*Do personality traits moderate the relationship between corruption experience and political trust or does corruption experience mediate the relationship between personality traits and political trust?*

In this dissertation, I am making a complementary explanation of political trust being shaped by personality traits. The Big Five contribute to the extensive work in political behavior, which is also interested in individual-level factors which affect their reactions to stimuli. Personality traits are, therefore, an essential contribution to the literature on how individuals' dispositions and the political context affect political attitudes and behavior (Gerber et al. 2011).

Now that the pathways have been clarified, I discuss the methods used to test these direct and indirect relationships.

# 3 Research design, data, and methods

## 3.1 Research design

The theory and mechanisms I have proposed for how and when personality traits affect political trust are causal. However, causal designs are difficult to employ in the field of personality traits for several reasons. First, personality traits are developed in childhood, and the ideal design requires people to be studied over time. Second, personality traits entail behavioral, motivational, cognitive, and affective processes in the brain. Consequently, the ideal study would make brain scans to detect if people with different personality traits differ in their trust in institutions or react differently to information or experiences with institutions. In other words, this is very difficult to measure.

The main strength of the personality literature, however, is that it has developed good survey measurements for the latent traits, and countless studies have been conducted to validate the measures, some-

thing I will return to in the next section. Another strength is that these survey measures are easy to implement and have thus been employed in several nationally representative surveys frequently used by political scientists. However, these surveys often use cross-sectional designs and not panel components, rendering causal analysis difficult.

Most research questions in the field of personality traits are causal, but besides survey panel designs testing the stability of personality traits, other causal designs are more rarely employed. Therefore, it would be preferable to use panel data and conduct times-series analyses. Then it would be possible to test for possible mediating factors and potentially also test whether there is a causal relationship between personality traits and political trust. Unfortunately, I could not access this kind of data.

Importantly, the restrictions of personality measurement and data availability are central considerations affecting the possibility of using causal designs in my studies. As a result, the dissertation combines different observational design strategies to answer the overall research question *how and when personality traits affect political trust*. Moreover, as political trust varies across the world and is context-dependent, I have opted to study high and low-trusting countries as well as high and low-corruption contexts. I, therefore, take a comparative approach in the thesis as a whole and include several countries in the analysis (Pepinsky 2019).

In the first two papers, I conduct cross-sectional single-country studies. The first paper studies the relationship between traits and political trust in Sweden, and the second studies the relationship in the Netherlands. The benefit of these studies is that I use high-quality, nationally representative data. Moreover, one of the benefits of the single-country design is that I can hold contextual factors, such as economy

or media market, constant while studying the micro-level relationship between individuals' traits and their trust in institutions (Angrist and Pischke 2014). Lastly, I argue that Sweden and the Netherlands serve as tough tests for the theory that personality traits affect political trust, as trust in institutions is very high in these countries compared to most countries (Zmerli and Newton 2017).

In the third paper, I use a cross-country, cross-sectional design of the relationship between traits and political trust in North and Latin America. In this paper, I test how personal experience of institutions may moderate or mediate the effect of personality traits on political trust. Moreover, extending the study to Latin America ensures that political trust is studied outside Western Europe and North America. Lastly, as I argue that corruption hinders institutional performance, using a Latin American sample ensures that people who have experienced corruption are included.

To conclude this section, I have opted to use less causal language when interpreting the models and drawing conclusions from my findings due to the design of the studies. The causal interpretations of my models are, therefore, only suggestive. Now that I have clarified the overall design strategy and case selection, I will discuss the many factors that could affect the relationship between personality traits and political trust.

### **3.2 Potential confounders and intervening variables**

I am interested in the total effect of personality traits on political trust, which guides my decision to include and exclude certain factors from the analysis. Next, I discuss factors like potential confounders, intervening variables traits, and reversed causality and how I try to mitigate

their effects.

First, I include all personality traits in the final models to avoid omitted variable bias. For example, as every person has some degree of agreeableness and some degree of conscientiousness, it is essential to control for all traits. In addition, by holding potential confounders constant, I can better gauge the effect of each personality trait on political trust and increase the internal validity of the results.

Moreover, age and gender are also likely confounders since age and gender affect personality development (Costa, Terracciano, and McCrae 2001; Caspi, Roberts, and Shiner 2005), which interactions individuals have with the political actors and institutions, as well as their political trust attitudes. Therefore, since age and gender are possible confounders, they are included as control variables in each study.

For a long time, ensuring that people have the same information has long been considered 'the great equalizer.' But research in personality traits has shown that personality traits affect both which types of sources an individual seeks and also how critically they interpret that information (Mondak 2010, 21). Therefore, factors enhancing people's ability to read and interpret political information can influence the relationship between personality traits and political trust. Education is, therefore, a factor that can affect how personality traits are related to political trust. This since people who are more educated should be better able to evaluate political information critically.

For example, highly educated individuals punish corrupt governments harder, i.e., by placing less trust in them than their lower educated counterparts (Hakhverdian and Mayne 2012). Theoretically, the highly educated might also be more opposed to corruption for moral reasons. Still, these individuals might also be more likely to experience corruption during their years in the education system (Agerberg

2019). Surprisingly, people who are more politically informed in high-corruption contexts have lower political trust. This could be explained by the well-informed becoming resigned as they understand they cannot change the system (Bauhr and Grimes 2014; Chong et al. 2015).

However, personality primarily affects selection into education. For example, previous studies have found that people scoring high on openness and conscientiousness select into education and have higher academic performance (Rammstedt and Krebs 2017; Rasmussen 2016; Schoon et al. 2010). Education may therefore be a mediating variable. Nevertheless, as I am interested in the overall relationship between personality traits and political trust, together with the data limitation to cross-sectional surveys, I do not control for education in the main analyses.

Another factor that could affect the focal relationship is generalized trust since previous research has found a link between generalized trust and political trust, as well as between personality traits and generalized trust. The relationship between personality traits and generalized trust has been found to have both genetic roots and to be caused by personality traits (Hiraishi et al. 2008; Oskarsson et al. 2012). Moreover, some personality trait scholars conceptualize generalized trust as a personality trait and as a subcategory of agreeableness. On the other hand, studies of the relationship between generalized trust and political trust have debated the causal order for a long time. However, contemporary research shows that political trust and institutional performance precede generalized trust. Consequently, I do not include generalized trust as a control variable in the main models since it may cause collider bias. However, the previous findings between personality traits and generalized trust have guided my theoretical reasoning. In paper 3, I argue that "in a society where institutions successfully

coordinate individuals in general, which reduces the risk inherent in trusting other people, we might also see high trusting patterns among [highly conscientious] people whereas the opposite is to be expected in a low-performance setting.” Moreover, if conscientious individuals have lower levels of trust in their peers, they might be willing to place more trust in institutions which create order and reduce risk.

In this dissertation, I have argued that how individuals perceive institutional performance is important. However, it is clear that if information is to act as a ‘great equalizer,’ the performance information must be correct. This means that aspects affecting the quality of information people receive about political institutions, i.e., the media landscape, are important. Whether the media is free to investigate political actors and institutions and how they frame issues is key for the public to receive accurate information (Hetherington 1998). While it is an important factor, including media variables would entail a different design. Moreover, the role of the media in transmitting information is rarely included in the study of political trust. Still, experiments studying how personality traits evaluate content and sender effects on political trust would be very welcome.

Moreover, a correct depiction of performance may also be clouded since politicians and partisans often use allegations of corruption or malfeasance to disqualify other candidates or parties. This leads to a discussion about how partisanship and party choice may affect the relationship between personality traits and political trust.

Earlier political science scholarship claimed that personality determines ideology and vote choice (Bloeser et al. 2015; Mondak and Halperin 2008; Jost, Nosek, and Gosling 2008). These factors are highly linked as more open individuals have more liberal values and vote for leftist or liberal parties. By contrast, highly conscientious individuals tend to



hold more traditional values and vote for conservative or right-wing parties. However, contemporary research has shown that personality, ideology, and party preferences have the same biological roots and that personality does not precede changes in ideology and vote choice (Osborne and Sibley 2020; Osborne, Satherley, and Sibley 2021; Bakker, Lelkes, and Malka 2021). Furthermore, a change in the assessed trustworthiness of political actors and institutions will likely affect party preferences and their vote choice. I, therefore, argue that party preferences, ideology, and vote choice should not be included in the main analysis because of reversed causality and the risk of introducing collider bias.

Another important finding in previous research is that personality traits, in particular conscientiousness and neuroticism, predict job performance (Speer et al. 2022), which tend to affect income. Moreover, depending on your income or employment status, people tend to have different experiences with authorities (Kumlin 2004). It is, therefore, unsurprising that income and employment status affect political trust. For example, people with low income or the unemployed tend to punish governments and political institutions harder than people with high income and more secure positions. Therefore, income and employment status are intervening variables, and due to the data structure, I do not include them as control variables in the main models.

Lastly, I have argued that corruption leads to lower trust, but there are also possible feedback loops or reversed causality suggested in the previous literature where low political trust could lead to corruption. According to Donatella della Porta (2000, 205), "the lack of confidence in government actually favors corruption insofar as it transforms citizens into clients and bribers who look for private protection to gain access to decision-makers." This is also supported by Cleary and Stokes

(2009), who find that low trust increases clientelism. Lastly, individuals with more experience in bribery were also more inclined to excuse and justify this phenomenon (Lee and Guven 2013). While this is a problem for the general literature, I side with most of the literature arguing that corruption comes first, and also test a micro-mechanism of corrupt encounters to account for this possible bias.

### **3.3 Measurement**

To assess the relationship between personality traits and political trust, I need to design studies to capture variations in trust and traits. Political trust and personality traits can be studied in many ways, but I use a quantitative approach. The most common way to measure political trust and personality traits is to use surveys where individuals rate how much they trust political institutions or how much a statement about their character corresponds to themselves on a Likert scale from 1 to 5.

Researchers then use dimensionality reduction techniques to transform the data from the batteries of items into fewer dimensions. Next, mean-centered scales are created based on the items in each dimension. For example, openness is created by averaging the responses to items on artistic interests and intellect.

However, the best possible instruments for these latent traits would be observable measurements, where individuals' acquiescence or desirability bias would be circumvented. But personality traits and political trust are not only behavioral and include cognitive and emotional tendencies. Consequently, I first discuss how the independent variable personality trait is measured. Next, I proceed with how the dependent variable political trust, is estimated. Lastly, I discuss how the interac-

tion variable corruption experience is measured.

### **3.3.1 Measuring the independent variable personality traits**

While a majority of personality trait scholars agree that the Big Five describes most of the variation in individual differences, the biggest debate in this literature regards measurement. As personality traits are latent variables, they are difficult to measure through observation. Self-reporting is, therefore, the key mode to collect data (Mondak and Halperin 2008). Importantly, previous studies have observed a high correlation between self-rating and peer-rating, which suggests that the external validity of the Big Five is not a big problem (Mondak 2010, 31–32).

The Big Five measurement traditions can be divided into two higher categories; adjectives-based or sentence-based. An adjectives-based measurement can look like this "To what extent would you say that the following words describe you? 1) Active 2) Assertive 3) Enthusiastic". The sentence-based approach would instead ask respondents to rate how well a statement corresponds to them, such as "I am quiet around strangers," "I start conversations," or "I talk to a lot of different people at parties." While the adjectives-based approach was crucial for developing the Big Five, the sentence-based approach is becoming more dominant in the field.

While the Big Five entailed a significant improvement in measuring personality, one problem for this literature is that there is not one coherent measurement model, and there is not a lot of information for researchers on choosing the most appropriate personality measure for their study. Examples of models are The Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI-R), The Big Five Inventory (BFI), and The International Personality Item Pool (IPIP), each of which also varies in length

and wording (See overview in John, Naumann, and Soto (2008)). HEXACO is a contender to the Big Five and adds a sixth factor – Honesty-Humility to the remaining 4 (Ashton, Lee, and De Vries 2014). The Honesty-Humility trait captures the tendency to be sincere, fair, non-materialistic, and modest. What I want to highlight is that many different scales could be employed to measure the same underlying personality domains and lower categories.

A problem in this literature is the focus on internal validity in developing personality scales. This has meant an over-reliance on confirmatory factor analysis and principal component analysis. Moreover, whether latent variable models identify the same underlying Five traits (Boyle 2008) remains unclear. But scholars and practitioners want to use personality traits to predict outcomes like job satisfaction, performance, attitudes, and diagnostics. Therefore, the main obstacle to using personality traits to predict outcomes is still clouded, first by the inconsistency in measurement and second by the measure's content.

Alongside the question of the content of scales is a debate about the length of scales. Not surprisingly, the best measurements of personality traits are lengthy, including ~ 250 items (Credé et al. 2012). And in personality psychology, researchers tend to think that a 50-item battery is small. But researchers are often short on space and time with respondents. Therefore, short scales have many benefits, such as high response rates and reduced response bias through lowering fatigue and boredom.

However, which items are included in the scale affect the predictions. Together with the focus on item reduction through CFA, this usually means that some lower categories of traits are favored, such as the lower category of extraversion called gregariousness measuring sociability. Which items are included therefore affect predictions, and

unsurprisingly the scales using the lowest amount of items are most affected and could lead to errors regarding the direction and strength of the effect (Bakker and Leles 2018; Bromme, Rothmund, and Azevedo 2022).

On the other hand, one major strength of the trait literature is the plethora of validation studies. For example, experimental designs to study traits are growing, but this practice is not expected within the personality literature since personality is a latent trait and not directly observable (Mondak 2010). However, the foundation of the field is still to use self-assessed surveys, and experimental work has been vital to validate and estimate the causal nature and contextual effects on the Big Five (Revelle 2009; DeYoung et al. 2010; Kajonius and Giolla 2017).

For example, cognitive testing has been improved through working memory tests or experimental manipulations with caffeine (Revelle 2009). Brain scans have also proved useful tools to explain variations in personality traits (DeYoung et al. 2010). Another practical experimental design to study personality traits is to use movies or stories to manipulate emotional responses, such as anger or anxiety (Revelle 2009).

Despite technology allowing these studies, they could be more cost-effective. I have therefore relied on the classical measurement of latent traits through surveys. There are two reasons this approach suffices, brain scans and trait experiments have noted a high correlation between them and latent traits measured through surveys. Second, I can make generalizations and use larger samples by using surveys.

Therefore, in all data sets used in this dissertation, each trait is measured by at least two survey items per trait dimension, where one taps into the high end of the trait and vice versa. For example, openness in the Ten Item Personality Inventory (TIPI) is measured as I see my-

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self as someone who” has many artistic interests” and ”does not have a vivid imagination” (See paper appendices for exact wording).

Two papers, paper one and paper three, rely on short personality batteries. Unsurprisingly this leads to a low correlation between items in each dimension. However, the items selected for the short batteries are key aspects of those theories why I argue that they are still sufficient to use.

In paper two, however, I use a more extended battery of personality traits consisting of 60 questions. I then disaggregate personality traits and study the relationships between higher and lower categories of personality traits and political trust. I rely on the higher-order categories of the Big Five, the intermediate categories (called facets) that capture cautiousness or intellect, for example, and each item in the battery independently.

One problem that can lead to biased estimates in my last paper is that respondents were asked to rate their personality in a survey about political attitudes and behavior. Therefore, respondents may interpret personality in political terms instead of responding according to their overall personality (Gerber et al. 2011; Bakker, Lelkes, and Malka 2021). While I cannot adjust this bias in that paper, it is essential to note. To account for this possible bias in paper two, I relied on panel surveys (LISS) where people responded to personality and political trust in separate surveys fielded a few months apart. Paper one depends on the SOM survey, which involves more comprehensive questions about media, society, and opinions which should make the personality estimate less biased by political views.

### 3.3.2 Measuring the dependent variable political trust

Political trust has also been studied through experiments. For example, through survey or lab experiments such as public goods games or trust games (Wilson and Eckel 2017). Survey experiments have been used to manipulate information about an institution or the qualities of that institution. For example, if information about climate change comes from a highly trusted institution, i.e., the military, it can change public attitudes to climate change. List experiments have also been important for reducing desirability bias in questions about the trustworthiness of political institutions in authoritarian contexts.

Other experimental approaches have focused on the behavioral consequences of trust and low trust. Notably, experimental laboratory approaches such as public goods games have manipulated the trustworthiness of institutions through the possibility of assigned officials' misuse of finances. In addition, incentivized trust games, or investment games as they are also called, have been used to assess political trust by asking players to send money to a fellow citizen or a public official. Unsurprisingly, people tend to trust their fellow citizens more than the official (Wilson and Eckel 2017).

Political trust has also increasingly been defined as a multidimensional concept (van der Meer and Ouattara 2019; Grimmelikhuijsen and Knies 2017). Individuals are argued to make three assessments about public institutions that compose the higher-order political trust. First, individuals assess the competence of institutions, which regards whether public servants are knowledgeable enough to perform a particular task. Second, individuals evaluate the benevolence of institutions, i.e., how institutions are willing to complete their tasks. Third, individuals assess the power of institutions, namely whether institutions have the means to deliver on the task. While this is a promising future

endeavor to study political trust, I am still looking for a survey including a hierarchical measurement of political trust and personality traits. Consequently, I base these studies on the unidimensional approach to political trust and the standard measurement of political trust as "To what extent do you think institution x can be trusted?".

#### **3.4 Data**

This section discusses the surveys and data I use in this dissertation. First, the overarching data approach is to use several large-scale, nationally representative surveys. The panel surveys fielded by the Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences (LISS) (Tilburg University, CentER Data), the cross-sectional surveys fielded by The Society, Opinion and Media Institute (SOM) (University of Gothenburg 2020), and the AmericasBarometer fielded by the LAPOP lab (Vanderbilt University 2010) all used national probability samples. Therefore, the surveys are proportional to the Dutch, Swedish, and Latin and North American countries' populations, which is valuable for the possibility of generalizing the findings from my studies.

The second data strategy is that I have opted to use surveys able to capture variation over time. Testing the focal relationship with more years of data increases the validity and robustness of my findings. Moreover, by using the panel design of the LISS survey, where respondents get to answer questions on political trust during the winter months of 2020 and personality questions later in the spring of the same year, I circumvent the problem of cross-sectional designs where self-assessed personality traits may be affected by political trust (Gerber et al. 2011; Bakker, Lelkes, and Malka 2021). Consequently, I reduce the possibility that people assess their personality traits according to their political



attitudes and behavior.

Third, as previous research has shown that individuals evaluate each political institution separately, I have selected surveys to be able to test the relationship between traits and trust in different institutions. I, therefore, cover trust in the government, the national parliament, the municipal boards, the political parties, the police force, the courts, and health care services in the different studies.

Fourth, as personality traits are hierarchical and aspects of the same trait can lead to higher or lower political trust, there is an additional strength of using the LISS panel. LISS employs a long and internally valid measurement consisting of 10 items per trait in the Big Five (from the International Personality Item Pool) (Goldberg et al. 2006). Therefore, the battery is detailed enough that lower levels of the personality hierarchy can be captured and their effects on political trust assessed.

### **3.5 Estimation techniques**

The three papers' methods are factor analysis, ordinary least square regression analysis, and probit regression. In the final paper, I also do interaction analyses and mediation analyses.

For the second paper, there are two potential methods I could have used to capture the multidimensionality of personality traits, namely structural equation modeling or hierarchical item response theory. But I argue that the OLS executed the two levels of abstraction suffice to describe variations of direction and impact within traits. Moreover, the main benefit of using OLS is that more people understand these analyses making them more accessible to readers outside the academic community.

For the third and final paper, an alternative approach could be to

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run multilevel models where individuals are nested in countries. But as the AmericasBarometer dataset only includes 24 countries, I have too few group-level variables to use multilevel modeling as the primary approach. So instead, I provide this analysis as a robustness check in the appendix and find similar, but weaker, relationships in the multilevel model.

# 4 Three papers in brief

This dissertation is a compilation of the following three solo-authored papers.

## 4.1 Paper one: Personality Traits and Trust in Political Institutions

An emerging literature argues that individual differences in trust in political institutions are linked to personality traits. Yet, a rival literature argues that institutional performance affects political trust. Each literature has conceptualized political trust as one underlying dimension, but recent findings show that individuals evaluate the performance of one institution at a time. By considering trust in different institutions, the previous contradictory findings for some personality traits can be clarified.

I argue that personality traits drive political trust since personality traits capture our general outlook in life and they may affect how individuals process information and interact with others. I then de-

velop expectations on how traits are related to trust in different institutions. To test this, I combined four waves of a probability-based cross-sectional survey on a representative sample of the Swedish population. Conducting this study in Sweden is a tough test for the theory that personality traits affect political trust, given that trust in institutions is remarkably high by international comparison (Zmerli and Newton 2017).

I first show that extraversion is positively related to political trust by using the standard approach, i.e., a composite trust scale. However, neither openness nor conscientiousness are related to general political trust. Yet, when studying trust in institutions separately, openness is positively related to trust in municipality boards and negatively related to trust in the police force and medical services. Contrary to openness, conscientiousness was positively related to trust in the police and medical services. Lastly, extraversion is only positively related to trust in the police.

Therefore, the literature risk drawing erroneous conclusions about the direction and effect size of the relationship between personality traits and political trust if we do not study trust in institutions individually. This paper, therefore, contributes to the institutional literature by finding that personality traits are related to political trust and to the personality literature by developing the theoretical argument on how traits are connected to trust in different institutions.

### **4.2 Paper two: Subcategories of Personality Traits and the Relationship with Political Trust**

Political science scholarship has found that personality traits matter for political attitudes and behavior. One problem with political science research on personality traits is that it often relies on short batteries of

personality traits, including too few items. This is concerning since previous scholarship has shown that the short personality traits batteries can lead to sign or magnitude errors. In this paper, I use panel data with an extensive and validated measure of personality traits. I test the relationship between personality traits and political trust, which are related in studies using short measurement scales. The paper uses OLS regression and methods to compare non-nested models to accredit the effect of multidimensional personality traits on political trust.

While earlier political science scholarship has found that personality traits matter for political attitudes and behavior, surprisingly contradictory findings have been made for political trust. Subcategories of personality traits, such as a sense of duty or cautiousness, have been central for theory building, but empirical testing is needed. The lack of testing is concerning as broader categories might erroneously find no relationship if subcategories cancel each other out or worse if inaccurate measurements contribute to the contradictory findings.

I use survey panel data on a representative sample of the Dutch population, which includes an exhaustive and validated measure of personality traits to test if it is necessary to divide personality traits further. In other words, I explore if applying the lower levels of abstraction, i.e., personality facets, improves the explanation of the variation in political trust or if the standard approach to use broad personality traits such as extraversion and conscientiousness suffice.

As personality is hierarchical, the empirical strategy is to test the relationship between personality and political trust at different levels of abstraction. The first level is the highest order, and the standard approach in the literature is to use personality domains. The second level tests the facet-level effects of personality on political trust. By testing the relationship at different levels, I can answer two questions:

1) Looking at the results at the various levels, which conclusions would be drawn about the effect of traits on trust? 2) Should lower or higher categories of personality traits be used to explain variation in political trust?

I find that lower-level personality traits explain better variation in political trust than higher-level personality traits. I also find variations in the size and magnitude of lower-level personality traits within the same higher category, which can explain the previous contradictory findings in the literature. This study, therefore, contributes to the personality psychology and political trust literature by explaining how personality traits affect political trust.

### **4.3 Paper three: Who Reduces Political Trust after Experiencing Corruption? Introducing the Role of Personality Traits. *International Political Science Review***

Why do some individuals who have to pay bribes in their daily lives still trust their governments? Previous research has observed this but has been unable to explain why. This paper argues that the effect of personality traits on political trust may be mediated or moderated by corruption experience. Doing so builds on two strands of previous research showing that 1) personality traits affect how we process and interpret information. 2) Personality traits affect how we seek information and what types of experiences we have in life.

To test this, I use the Americas-Barometer 2010, covering individuals in 24 North and Latin American countries. Using OLS, I find that all personality traits correspond to decreased political trust after being solicited for a bribe. Moreover, I find that openness, conscientious-

ness, agreeableness, and emotional stability amplify the effect of police corruption on trust in the police. At the same time, I find that extraversion amplifies the negative effect of bribery on trust in the government. Therefore, I find support for my expectation that personality constrains the effect of corruption experience on trust in one of the two institutions.

I also find support for the second pathway I proposed, i.e., that personality traits affect selection into corruption experience. Using probit models, I demonstrate that openness, extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability are linked to corruption exposure. People scoring high on openness and extraversion are more likely to be solicited for bribes, whereas highly agreeable and neurotic individuals are less likely to be asked for bribes. However, mediation analyses showed that corruption experience mediated the effect of only two traits on trust in the police.

One benefit of this paper is that being asked to pay a bribe is not a self-reported interpretation of that stimuli (Gerber et al. 2011). If studies rely on self-reported stimuli, which is more common in personality research, the interpretation of the stimuli should also depend on personality traits.

I contribute to the corruption perception literature and the field of personality traits by finding that personality constrains the effect of corruption on political trust. Further, the study's findings suggest that future political behavior research may consider heterogeneous impacts of personality traits.

### 4.4 Summary of results

The papers included in this dissertation show that personality traits affect political trust but that the effect depends on the institution, the level of abstraction, and the experience of institutions. In Table 3, I summarize the findings of the three papers.

While highly agreeable individuals trust institutions to a greater extent than lower agreeable individuals in all three studies, they also reduce their level of trust more if they are exposed to corruption. What this clearly shows is that agreeable individuals are not unconditional trusters. Instead, they may be warm, sympathetic, and generally trusting, but when confronted with wrongdoing by the police, in this case, they reduce their trust.

By contrast, neurotic individuals are considered to have low political trust, which I also find support for in the three papers. The theoretical expectations, that a person who is cynical, anxious, angry, or moody has conjectures that institutions are not to be trusted, therefore seem to hold.

For the three remaining traits openness, conscientiousness, and extraversion, I make several findings that clarify the conflicting results in previous research. First, personality traits lead people to trust different institutions. For example, highly conscientious individuals are cautious and dutiful, which could make them trust the police and order institutions to a greater extent. Moreover, the variation between the lower facets, which sometimes cancels out the effect of other facets, or where only one facet drives the relationship for the entire trait, explains why some studies have made contradictory findings.

Lastly, people reducing political trust when exposed to police or government bribery supports previous research that institutional per-



Table 3: Overview of expectations, findings, and conclusions

Study	Paper 1	Paper 2	Paper 3
Research question	Does the relationship between personality traits and political trust depend on the institution?	Do lower categories of personality traits explain variation in political trust better than higher categories?	Do personality traits mediate the relationship between corruption experience and political trust or does corruption experience mediate the relationship between personality traits and political trust?
Data	Representative cross-section data of the Swedish population from 2013, 2014, 2016, and 2018 by The Society, Opinion and Media Institute	Representative panel data of the Dutch population from 2020 by the Longitudinal Internet studies for the Social Sciences	Representative cross-section data of 24 North and Latin American countries from 2010 by the AmericasBarometer LAPOP lab
Method	OLS with year-fixed effects	OLS	OLS with country-fixed effects
Conclusion	Personality traits are related to political trust, but the direction and strength of the link depends on the trait	Personality traits affect political trust. Subcategories of personality traits explain variation in political trust better than the higher categories.	Personality traits affect exposure to corruption and constrains the effect of corruption on political trust.

#### 4 THREE PAPERS IN BRIEF

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formance matters for political trust. However, given that personality traits react differently to bribery, institutional misconduct does not affect individuals in the same way. While people evaluate institutions' performance independently, we must consider how the individual is making their evaluation. In conclusion, psychological factors and institutional performance work in tandem to form people's trust in institutions.

# 5 Conclusions

## 5.1 Contribution to the personality traits and political trust literature

This dissertation sought to answer the overarching question of how and when personality traits affect political trust. Together, the three papers address the overall question. Paper one and two test the overall effect of personality traits on political trust and explain *how* traits affect political trust. Paper three tests the mediating and moderating pathways and contributes to explaining *when* traits affect political trust.

Consequently, the papers complement each other by using different design and measurement approaches, to understand previous contradictory findings and to uncover the relationship between personality traits and political trust.

Previous research has concluded that personality traits have a limited and negligible effect on political attitudes and behavior since results vary and have small effect sizes (Gerber et al. 2011). This dissertation has made several significant contributions to literature by showing

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that a) personality traits have a small but significant effect on political trust. b) Treating trust in institutions as a uniform concept leads to wrong effect estimations. Instead, if trust in institutions is measured as different institutions, different conclusions are drawn about the effect of traits. c) The lower categories of personality traits (facets) explain variation in political trust better than the higher categories (the standard Big Five traits). d) Personality traits moderate the relationship between the experience of corruption and political trust. e) Personality traits affect selection into corrupt experiences.

I further highlight the contributions, starting with the five theoretical contributions. First, I develop theoretical arguments for the direct effects of personality traits on political trust. Personality traits capture individuals' emotional, behavioral, and cognitive differences, thus, our general perspective on the world around us. For example, personality traits include individuals' affect, which regards the extent someone is optimistic, cynical, or anxious. Another example of traits capturing our general tendencies is that agreeable individuals are altruistic and sympathetic. In other words, they are positive towards others and may also be positive when others are in government. I, therefore, argue that personality traits can have a direct effect on political trust.

Second, I combine findings from previous research showing that information about and experience with institutions affect political trust, with findings showing that personality traits affect how people interpret information and experiences. I develop a theoretical argument for why institutional performance, and the most considerable hindrance of this, corruption, is the most important experience to consider when assessing the relationship between traits and political trust. I, therefore, argue that personality traits moderate the effect of corruption experiences on political trust.

Third, previous research has found that people are not exposed to the same institutional experiences such as corruption. Thus I argue that personality traits affect individuals' selection into negative experiences with institutions and that this, in turn, leads them to be less trusting of political institutions. The second argument is that the effect of personality traits on political trust may be mediated by corruption experience.

I maintain that it is not only the population's average level of corruption response that we should study. For example, if one group decreases their trust after a policy change and another increases their trust slightly more, research would erroneously conclude that this leads to increases in trust. But the scholarly community should strive to understand why both groups change. Therefore it is interesting to know what increases and suppresses political trust for different people, such as people with different personality traits.

Fourth, previous research on traits has conceptualized political trust as one underlying dimension. Still, contemporary research on political trust shows that individuals evaluate the trustworthiness of one institution at a time. Moreover, I develop theoretical arguments for how people with different traits could be expected to trust different institutions, such as the government, parliament, parties, politicians, the courts, and the police. For example, highly conscientious individuals who are risk averse are expected to have higher trust in the police and lower trust in the parties, politicians, and governments.

The fifth theoretical contribution regards the relationship between personality traits and political trust at the lower personality levels. As the relationship between higher-order traits depends on lower-order traits, using the lower traits for theory and testing can clarify how different phenomena are related. In this case, lower-order traits explain

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the previous conflicting results for the relationship between general personality traits and political trust.

Moving on to the empirical contributions, I make three contributions to the literature that help explain the variation in previous literature. First, by finding that the direction and size of the effect of traits depend on the institution in question. This means that future research should continue to study trust in different institutions and avoid falling into the trap of assuming they are all the same.

Second, the Big Five personality traits are hierarchical and comprise lower factors. These lower factors have been used to develop expectations for the relationship between the Big Five and political outcomes but rarely tested. The lower categories explain more of the variation in political trust than the higher categories. Moreover, I also find a variation between the lower hierarchies of the same personality traits in the size and direction they affect political trust. This variation explains the contradictory findings in the previous literature. I argue that bringing the lower categories into theorizing and testing more clearly would make studying personality effects more transparent.

The findings regarding the direction and strength of the effect highlight that researchers must consider which Big Five scale they are using as this affects the conclusions drawn about the effect on political trust. These insights should not only matter for those interested in explaining political trust, but scholars studying the relationship between personality traits and outcomes in the political and social arena.

The third and last empirical contribution regards my finding that personality traits condition the effect of corruption experience on political trust. Therefore, people with different personality traits do not change their trust the same way when asked to pay a bribe. I also find that personality traits affect selection into corrupt experiences,

but these experiences only partially mediate the effect of two personality traits on political trust.

With this in mind, I conclude that personality traits affect political trust and that this effect is small, albeit essential when personality traits and political trust are measured correctly.

## **5.2 Limitations**

Hitherto, I have described the strengths of my studies. However, there are also several limitations of the dissertation. Starting with the measurement of personality traits. As my second paper finds that lower-order personality traits explain variation in trust better than higher categories, I would have preferred to have included this approach in the other papers. While the data does not include that same information in the different papers, using different datasets also brings certain benefits. The first dataset includes trust in many different institutions, the second includes multifaceted traits, and the third includes a good measure of institutional interactions: bribery experience. As a result, the different designs and approaches of the three papers complement each other. Hence, I encourage future research to integrate the study of higher and lower personality categories with institutional interactions or information on political trust.

Another limitation is that I have only focused on one model of personality, i.e., the Big Five, which depicts personality as relatively stable traits. But as I have previously mentioned, other personality scales could matter for political trust. Examples of other personality models that could explain why individuals differ in their trust in political institutions are authoritarian personality traits, the dark triad, and locus of control, to name a few. More research on these personality mod-

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els is needed to know how deeply rooted psychological factors affect political outcomes like political trust.

Furthermore, while this dissertation does not explicitly test the effect of the media, it is a plausible mechanism that differences in personality traits affect how we interpret information which shapes our trust in institutions. The media and social media provide people with information about how institutions perform, which is especially important in providing information about governments and high-level occurrences. Future work should therefore study the effect of personality on political trust in response to scandals or crises.

Apart from the media, I suggested several factors which could affect the relationship between personality traits and political trust such as education, income, employment status, party preference, and ideology. Because of the data structure and cross-sectional design, I could not test the potential mediating role of these variables. More research is therefore needed to test the potential pathways linking personality traits to political trust.

Moreover, the question is, are performance evaluations and trust in government the same concept? For example, the government may not perform well at the moment (e.g., during an economic recession), but people may still trust the government more generally. Future studies would therefore benefit from a focus on the time-dependence of trust attitudes.

### **5.3 Implications for research and policy**

This dissertation is situated within the debate on whether individuals' biology or the context within which individuals exist matters for political attitudes and behavior. Political science has long avoided studies of



biologically based explanations of individuals' traits and behavior, with the notable exceptions of gender and aging. These explanations may have been avoided because studying biology in politics is often more challenging, but they are also perceived to be ethically questionable (Sturgis et al. 2010).

Normative considerations aside, this dissertation is part of a growing literature showing that political attitudes have dispositional roots. This research can help us understand sometimes contra intuitive findings, such as why some individuals do not reduce trust in the government after being solicited for a bribe.

Another concern against the study of dispositional traits is that this would lead to determinism. For example, if political trust is only based on our genes, then are some countries destined to keep having a population with low trust in institutions, followed by low political engagement, rule-following, and low tax morale? In response to this, I argue that it is positive that personality traits have shown small effect sizes and, thus, low explanatory power. This dissertation has shown, together with the cumulative evidence of the personality literature, that personality traits matter for political attitudes and behavior, but contextual factors still matter more.

In essence, countries can escape social traps with low trust, but this requires institutional design as traits change slowly. That said, changing institutions in practice has proven difficult but can lead to higher political trust. What personality traits and other psychological theories can add to the study of politics is how individuals perceive these changes. For example, psychological factors shape an individual's experiences and interpretation of government interactions and policy changes for attitude formation.

Future research should also study the interaction between traits.

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For example, does it matter whether an individual scores high on conscientiousness and extraversion to influence political trust? I second the argument by Mondak and Halperin (2008) that "the political effects of extraversion may differ for extroverts who are high rather than low in conscientiousness." In paper two, I discuss the positive additive effect of being open, extraverted, conscientious, and emotionally stable on political trust. Traits may interact with the ability to process complex information or negative encounters.

More research is therefore needed on how personality traits interact with each other. Still, there is also a need to develop theoretical arguments for how personality interacts with other contextual effects. For example, while I focus on institutional performance and corruption, other contextual factors affect political trust, such as economic crises (van Erkel and van der Meer 2016; Torcal and Christmann 2021), welfare retrenchment (Kumlin and Haugsgjerd 2017), and political systems, should also be studied.

Lastly, future studies should also conduct experiments testing the conditioning effect of personality traits and corruption on political trust controlling for the type of bribe.

### **5.4 Concluding remarks**

In this dissertation, I have combined two conflicting approaches; one argues that the objective performance of institutions is evaluated equally by the population, and the second argues that individuals' deeply rooted characteristics are involved in all evaluations of the world around us. I have found that the reality lies somewhere in between. To fully understand political trust, we must both understand how institutions perform, but we must also consider how individuals make their evalua-

tions of performance. Therefore, psychological factors and institutional performance are key for the building of trust but also its possible demise.

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## **Included papers I-III**

1. Robertson, Felicia (2023a). Personality Traits and Trust in Political Institutions. Unpublished Manuscript.
2. Robertson, Felicia (2023b). Subcategories of Personality Traits and the Relationship with Political Trust. Unpublished Manuscript.
3. Robertson, Felicia (2023c). Who Reduces Political Trust after Experiencing Corruption? Introducing the Role of Personality Traits. *International Political Science Review*.