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A revolt of the distrustful? Political trust, political protest and the democratic deficit

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ABSTRACT



During recent crises in Europe, new heterogeneous protest movements have emerged that are difficult to label and classify. Existing studies suggest that the common denominator of these protesters is primarily the lack of political trust. Therefore, these new protest movements offer favourable conditions for investigating the relationship between political trust and protest disposition, and the consequences of political distrust for attitudes on democracy. Do these protests represent a 'revolt of the distrustful' which intensifies the frequently invoked perception of the 'democratic deficit'? Our study answers this question by focusing on protest disposition in two recent protest movements, the COVID-19 protest and the so-called 'energy protest', which have been an important part of the German protest landscape in recent years. Based on new survey data, our results reveal a considerable lack of trust in the core institutions of representative democracy in Germany and that political distrust increases the readiness for protest. The consequences of distrust for democratic attitudes are ambiguous, however. A nuanced analysis of their political attitudes reveals that distrustful citizens combine demands for an extension of participatory democracy, restrictive views on immigration and minority issues, and political preferences for radical right populist parties.


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KEYWORDS Protest; political trust; mobilisation potential; democratic deficit; social movements

Introduction

The starting point of our study is the recent protest movements that have emerged during Europe's long decade of multiple crises. Significant heterogeneity can be observed both in the overall picture of these movements and in specific cases, such as the Gilets Jaunes in France, the protests

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against immigration in Germany, or the protest against containment measures during the COVID-19 pandemic in a large number of European countries (Borbáth *et al.*, 2021; Cammaerts, 2021; Daphi *et al.*, 2023; della Porta, 2022, 2023; Driscoll, 2023; Kriesi & Oana, 2023; Oana *et al.*, 2024). This applies to the protest topics, the political orientation of participants, the organisation of protest, and the social composition of such movements. Consequently, categorising these protests into conventional labels of 'left' and 'right', 'progressive' and 'regressive' proves challenging. The various crises have fuelled not only progressive movements that combine the fight for social justice with the defence of political freedom (della Porta, 2022) but also regressive movements characterised by conspiracy theories, anti-democratic sentiments, and exclusionary demands against social minorities (della Porta, 2023). Existing studies suggest that the common denominator of these heterogeneous protests, alongside the significant role of social media and their discontinuity, is primarily the lack of political trust (e.g., Douenne & Fabre, 2022; Grande *et al.*, 2021; Grossman, 2019; Reichardt, 2021; Steinhilper *et al.*, 2022). More so, these accounts suggest that the new protest movements are a 'revolt' of distrustful citizens.

The political significance of these new protest movements is a matter of debate, however. For many, this protest is another symptom of the decline in political trust in Western democracies and of the pervasive 'crisis of democracy'. Amlinger and Nachtwey (2023), for example, argue that the 'anti-democratic' nature is precisely the characteristic of the 'libertarian authoritarianism' of the new protest movements in Germany. Della Porta (2022, p. 4), in her analysis of the protest movements during the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasises their progressive side, however, as they focused not only on legitimate social concerns such as housing, income, and education but also on deepening democracy, demands for participation, and opposition to repression.

All this suggests that the recent protest movements in Europe are not only an interesting object of study for social movement scholars. They also allow examining the consequences of the much-lamented lack of political trust in Western democracies. What are the political consequences of political distrust? Does it lead to greater willingness to protest? And what are the effects of distrust on satisfaction with democracy?

We contribute to answering these questions on the basis of original survey data. Our survey study is unique in that we concretely link political trust to mobilisation potential during two concrete crises and not only to protest in the abstract. Specifically, our study presents insightful descriptive evidence on the mobilisation potential of two protest movements in Germany, the COVID-19 protest and the so-called 'energy protests' (*Energieproteste*, in German) resulting from the 'Ukraine crisis'. They both have been an important part of the German protest landscape in recent years (Hutter *et al.*, 2023). The empirical analysis is carried out in three steps. In the first step, we study the

political trust deficit in Germany during the mobilisation phase of these movements in 2022. We show that there was a sizeable group of citizens who distrust the core institutions of representative democracy, namely government and parliament. In the second step, we examine the relationship between political distrust and protest disposition. We study the consequences of the lack of political trust on the sympathy with a specific protest movement and the willingness to participate in such protest. In the third step, we analyse the consequences of the trust deficit for democracy. Our findings suggest that distrust in government and parliament does not mean a fundamental rejection of democracy. On the contrary, the group of distrustful citizens is in favour of a deepening of democracy through the introduction of direct-democratic participation opportunities, rather than its replacement by a non-democratic political system. However, our findings do not support theories of critical citizenship. A nuanced analysis of their political attitudes reveals that distrustful citizens combine demands for an extension of participatory democracy, restrictive views on immigration and minority issues, and political preferences for radical right populist parties.

State of research and theory

The extensive literature on political trust does not provide a uniform and clear picture of the causes and consequences of different levels of political (dis)trust (for recent summaries see Carstens, 2023; Devine, 2024; Seyd, 2024; van der Meer, 2017). The effects of political (dis)trust on political participation 'remain particularly elusive' (Ouattara & Steenvoorden, 2024, p. 1). Whether a low level of political trust actually has consequences for political action, be it in elections or in protests, has still not been sufficiently clarified empirically. In his review of the research literature, van der Meer (2017, p. 1) states: 'While scholars have made great headway in understanding the sources of political trust [...], knowledge about its consequences has remained remarkably scarce'. And Devine (2024, p. 16), summarising the findings of his meta-analysis of 61 empirical studies on the consequences of trust, concludes, 'That we lack a clear idea of whether trust has consequences on important aspects of political life is a surprising gap in a fundamentally important literature'. This holds for the relationship between political trust and political protest in particular. While Devine's analysis shows that political trust is positively, though weakly to moderately, related to conventional political behaviour such as voter turnout and vote choice, it seems to be 'unrelated to informal participation' (Devine, 2024, p. 1) such as protests.

A more detailed look at the expanding literature on political trust and protest provides mixed results. In the case of political protest, Dalton (2004, pp. 173–177) found that low-trusting citizens are more likely to endorse direct political action. This has been supported by several studies. Hooghe

and Marien (2013, p. 131) show that while political trust is positively associated with institutionalised participation, it is negatively associated with non-institutionalised participation including the signing of a petition, the boycotting of products and participation in a demonstration. Braun and Hutter (2016) demonstrate with a multi-level analysis of 22 European democracies that citizens who distrust representative institutions are more likely to engage in extra-representational participation. This is confirmed by Ouattara and Steenvoorden (2024). As a result of a survey experiment, they conclude that distrusting citizens are more willing to participate in non-institutional activities. Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2018), analysing data on about 9,000 demonstrators spread over seven European countries, find that demonstrators' trust in their parliaments varies widely and that they also differ considerably in terms of motivation. Among others, they show that 'distrusting demonstrators are stronger motivated to demonstrate than trusting' (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2018, p. 775). And Daphi *et al.* (2023, p. 440), in their analysis of German protest on the basis of protest surveys collected between 2003 and 2020, identified 'two clusters of demonstrations, differing most prominently regarding participants' political trust, satisfaction with democracy, and perceptions of self-efficacy' – what they call the 'disenchanted critics' with low trust and the 'confident critics' with high trust.

In answering the question of whether political trust is a source of motivation or an obstacle to protest, contextual factors need to be considered. Prior research has demonstrated that the relationship between political trust and political protest is 'highly conditional on political context' (Devine, 2024, p. 15). This research has been particularly interested in political and institutional context factors, not least the political opportunity structures for political protest. Vráblíková (2014) showed that the willingness to engage in non-electoral participation is generally higher in decentralised political systems with more competitive veto points. Braun and Hutter (2016) found that the cultural and institutional openness of political systems significantly influences whether low political trust actually leads to an increased readiness for protest.

The 'multiple crises' of recent years have created additional contingencies in an already complex relationship between political attitudes, political trust, and political protest. Crises and the state measures taken to address them can have diverse effects on political trust and the readiness for political protest (della Porta, 2022), ranging from solidarity with the national government to political polarisation and a loss of trust in the case of 'state failure' (Kritzing *et al.*, 2021).

What are the consequences of political protest resulting from lacking political trust for democracy? Is it a cause for concern, as the conventional narrative of a 'crisis of democracy' suggests? Or is it an indispensable mechanism for progressive democratic renewal? Answering these questions confronts

another problem of research on trust, namely the diversity of the trust ‘family’ and the ambiguity of political distrust. Therefore, an increasing number of authors (Brezzi *et al.*, 2021; Carstens, 2023; Jennings *et al.*, 2021; Lenard, 2008; Newton & Zmerli, 2011; van De Walle & Six, 2014; van der Meer, 2017) propose differentiating the concept of political trust and systematically distinguishing between trust, mistrust and distrust. They argue that trust, mistrust and distrust represent distinct, independent members of a larger ‘family of trust’, each with different characteristics. ‘Distrust’, defined as the lack of trust, plays a special, and for our context particularly important role. In large parts of trust research, distrust has negative connotations. Lenard (2008) distinguishes ‘distrust’ from ‘mistrust’ and argues that ‘distrust is inimical to democracy’. Consequently, we are ‘right to worry about widespread reports of trust’s decline’. In a similar vein, Bertou (2019, p. 213), concludes ‘that citizen distrust of government and political institutions poses a threat for democratic politics’.

However, there are strong counter-arguments challenging this view. As Rosanvallon (2008) emphasises, distrust (‘defiance’) toward political authority is an indispensable resource in democracies. He distinguishes between ‘liberal’ and ‘democratic’ distrust. Liberal distrust pertains to skepticism in state authority in general; while democratic distrust refers to the effectiveness of political institutions and the control mechanisms established in modern democracies to oversee political authority. Consequently, ‘healthy skepticism’ towards state authority is indispensable even in modern democracies (Mishler & Rose, 1997).

In this context, following Inglehart’s work on post-materialist value change (Inglehart, 1977, 1990, 2008), a strand of research has emerged that links the decline of political trust in Western democracies with the rise of the so-called ‘critical citizen’ (see in particular the work of Norris, 1999, 2011; cf. also Fuchs & Klingemann, 1995). The ‘critical citizen’ combines skepticism and distance towards political authorities and institutions with strong support for democratic values. At the core of his criticism is the ‘democratic deficit’ in Western democracies, i.e., the gap between the democratic ideal and the actual performance of democracy in his own country (Norris, 2011, p. 5). For authors such as Norris (2011), della Porta (2013, 2020) and Rosanvallon (2008), it is precisely this ‘critical citizen’ who is the key actor for a progressive advancement of democracy. A recent panel study on the Netherlands by Ouattara and van der Meer (2023) supports these theories of critical citizenship. They found that low and declining trust diminish support for representative democracy. It does not affect support for authoritarianism, however; rather, it enhances support for direct democratic decision making. Van der Meer and van Erkel (2024) show that declining trust rates can reflect both critical citizens who monitor their democratic institutions; and a more fundamental disconnect between citizens and their democratic institutions.

Against this background, van der Meer (2017, p. 19) concludes ‘that lack of trust in political authorities and institutions need not be detrimental to democracy. Rather, mistrust may well be inherent to vibrant democratic societies, as long as it takes the shape of vigilant skepticism rather than numbing cynicism’. This can by no means be taken for granted, however. Following Norris *et al.* (2005), Christensen (2016) identifies three distinct kinds of political dissatisfaction with different implications for democracy. In his typology, political deprivation, i.e., a negative perception of subjective political empowerment, is of particular importance. ‘Protests fuelled by critical attitudes may benefit democracy while protests driven by alienation from politics constitute a democratic problem’ (Christensen, 2016, p. 2). The ‘disenchanted citizens’ combine low political support with low subjective empowerment; and he concludes that ‘this type of political dissatisfaction is the most serious threat because it can erode democratic legitimacy’ (Christensen, 2016, p. 5). Consequently, Brezzi *et al.* (2021, p. 39) argue that ‘distrust can be seen as a catalyst for revolting against elites and populist voting as people become dissatisfied with democracy’.

In the light of these ongoing debates, we conceptualise distrust as full lack of trust in democratic institutions, whereas mistrust reflects in contrast low levels of trust. Accordingly, we ask in this article: Do ‘distrustful citizens’ stand out in their disposition to political protest? And is the mobilisation potential of distrustful citizens in new protest movements a threat to democracy; or do they represent a new version of the ‘critical citizen’?

Research design, data and methods

Research design: two German protest movements in 2022

As our review of the scholarly literature and the state of the art suggests, studying the political consequences of low or even lacking levels of political trust is very challenging. In previous research scholars often relied on large N research designs in order to control for the large number of variables which could possibly play a role. In this study, we follow a different research strategy by combining a single country case study with a small comparative analysis.

We compare two different crises and the mobilisation potential of two protest movements in one country, namely Germany. Both crises and protest movements are very close in time; therefore, our study does not allow statements about developments, trends and dynamics of trust. As Ouattara and van der Meer (2023) have shown, it is important to distinguish between the ‘dynamic’ and the ‘structural’ aspects of low political trust. For this reason, we use the rise of two different protest movements within a few years as a ‘window of observation’ to explore the relationship between structurally low or even lacking political trust and political protest in detail.

More specifically, we study two protest movements in two different crisis contexts, the COVID-19 protests, which started in Spring 2020 and had their final peak in the Winter 2021/2022, and the ‘energy protests’, which emerged in the Fall of 2022 as a consequence of the war in Ukraine. Our analysis is based on two surveys, which, while closely timed (02/2022 and 12/2022–01/2023), capture peaks of mobilisation of both protest movements. This research design allows (1) for studying protest in a country which offers favourable conditions for political protest; while (2) keeping as many other contextual factors as possible constant.

Germany is an instructive case for studying the consequences of political distrust for several reasons. First, with its decentralised political system, Germany offers favourable opportunity structures for protest. This corresponds with a lively and volatile protest arena, always allowing new thematic claims and social movements to enter (Hutter, 2014). The 2000s have been characterised by a great variety of issues and the co-existence of two different types of protest movements, characterised by different levels of political trust (Daphi *et al.*, 2023). Second, Germany is among the North-West European countries whose political systems have benefitted from relatively high levels of political trust and political satisfaction and a strong civil society in the last two decades when compared to other European democracies (Enste & Suling, 2020; Kriesi *et al.*, 2020, p. 17ff.; see Appendix A3 on elaborated trust analysis over time using Eurobarometer and ESS data), even if satisfaction with democracy has been declining since the mid-2010s (Decker *et al.*, 2019). Finally, in the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, survey data show a similar ‘rally around the flag effect’ as observed in many other European countries (Brezzi *et al.*, 2021, p. 13; Kritzinger *et al.*, 2021). Figure 1, based on our data, shows the average level of trust in the Federal government was exceptionally high in 2020; in the following year however, it dropped sharply and it stayed at a low level in the next two years. Figure 1 also allows contextualising our case selection. The two specific survey rounds used in this article were completed in the 2021–2023 period of constant but lower levels of political trust compared to the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Their timing is marked by the two shadow areas in early 2022 and late 2022/early 2023.

As we are particularly interested in the political consequences of lacking political trust, we selected two of the most relevant and visible protest movements in recent years to study how political trust is related to political protest. Both movements can be categorised as ‘new new social movements’ (Cammaerts, 2021) which tend to mobilise previously inactive groups in society and are often characterised by an ambiguous, unaligned ideological programme across the different dimension of the political space. The two movements selected for our analysis of protest disposition emerged from two completely different crisis situations: the COVID-19 pandemic on the one

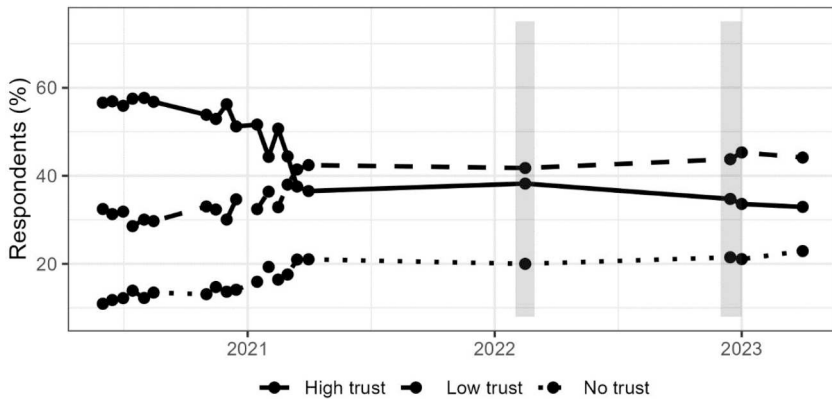


Figure 1. Trust in the German Federal government, 2020–2023.

Note: Share of respondents within each survey wave for the three different trust levels. Survey question: ‘How much do you trust the Federal government?’ (No trust: 0; Low trust: 1–5; High trust: 6–10). $N = 23,705$ across 20 cross-sectional survey waves between June 2020 and April 2023. Shaded areas in the Figure indicate the timing of the two surveys of our study: waves around 15 February 2022 and 1 January 2023.

hand and the Russian war on Ukraine on the other. Both crises have triggered new protest movements in Germany.

Our first case is the COVID-19 protest, initially a critique of containment measures during the early stages of the pandemic. These protests evolved and radicalised into a broader anti-systemic mobilisation, targeting the political elites and the political system altogether. In August 2020, radical-right and conspiracy groups also participated in two major protest events in Berlin with more than 20,000 participants each. Since then, these radical actors were known for trying to infiltrate large COVID-19 protests, although the broad protest participation pool was ideologically heterogeneous (Hunger *et al.*, 2023). The COVID-19 mobilisation peaked in the winter 2021/2022 (during our first survey field phase) with many informal walk-arounds (‘Spaziergänge’) due to containment protest restrictions, when an intense political conflict over the introduction of compulsory vaccination was taking place.

Our second case is the so-called ‘Ukraine crisis’ in winter 2022/2023. Similar to the COVID-19 protests, the ‘energy protests’ comprehended a broad mix of issues including conflicts over rising prices (in particular for oil and gas) as a consequence of the Russian war in Ukraine, and criticism of the national government because of its participation in Western economic sanctions against Russia and of military support for Ukraine. Although politicians from different political camps and mass media predicted a ‘hot fall of protest’ (*heißer Herbst*) and a ‘winter of rage’ (*Wutwinter*), ‘energy protests’ accounted for only 9 per cent of protest events in the German protest landscape in 2022 (Hutter *et al.*, 2023). The peak of this protest was reached

in October 2022, when 10.000 demonstrators were mobilised in front of the Federal parliament in Berlin to protest against the government's energy policies.

The COVID-19 crisis and the 'Ukraine crisis' were both largely driven by exogenous factors. Yet, the COVID-19 protests strongly addressed the governmental intervention into society to mitigate the pandemic, and the 'energy protests' fundamentally criticised the national government for its economic policies to tackle rising prices and its energy policies. In this regard, both crises share the similarity that the Federal government was seen as the main responsible for the consequences of the respective crisis by the protest movements.

Moreover, although the pandemic began in the final phase of the Merkel government formed by CDU/CSU and SPD, our two surveys – from February 2022 and January 2023 – both fall within the term of the newly elected 'Ampel coalition' formed by SPD, the Green Party and the liberal FDP (in government since December 2021). [Figure 1](#) shows that after a very high level of trust in the early phase of the pandemic, the Merkel government suffered from a massive decline in trust already. Hence, differences between the two crises cannot be attributed to changes in the political composition of government. As both surveys were conducted in the first year of the 'Ampel coalition', our results on political trust cannot be seen as an immediate expression of government performance and of the subsequent loss of political support of the Scholz government either. In short, in methodological terms, we benefit from a within-country and within-government comparison in which many characteristics are held constant across the two crisis contexts.

Data and methods

To study the micro-level relationship between political trust and different dimensions of political protest disposition, we make use of two cross-sectional survey studies conducted in Germany in February 2022 and January 2023 ($N_1 = 2,035$; $N_2 = 2,818$; $N_{\text{TOTAL}} = 4,853$). The surveys were conducted by the survey company bilendi/respondi using an online access panel. The sampling strategy was based on census quotas on gender, age groups, and educational levels. The survey questionnaire included further question items on political attitudes, social cohesion, political participation, and the role of political parties in Germany.¹

In these surveys, political trust is measured through the survey item 'We are interested in how much personal trust you have in each of the following public institutions, organisations, or groups. How much do you trust the Federal government?'.² The respondents were not presented with a few pre-defined response alternatives (e.g., 'very high', 'high', 'low', 'none at all'); rather, they had the opportunity to respond in a nuanced manner using an

11-point scale (0–10). This approach allows us to identify the group of distrustful citizens, i.e., those who have no political trust (equalling 0 in the item scale), more precisely than in other studies. We use the same formulation to ask for political trust in other public institutions, the national parliament in particular.

To study the consequences of political trust on political protest, we investigate the mobilisation potential of the protest movements and the disposition to protest more broadly rather than actual demonstrators in the streets. We use two indicators to determine the size of the potential to participate in protest: (1) *sympathy* with a specific protest (e.g., against COVID-19 measures) and (2) the *willingness to participate* in such protest (see Hunger *et al.*, 2023; Klandermans, 1984). The survey question on sympathy asked ‘How much sympathy do you have for the people who participated in demonstrations against the government’s COVID-19 measures (‘rising energy and living costs’, respectively)?’ To capture willingness to participate in such protests we asked ‘Would you participate in a demonstration against the government’s COVID-19 measures (‘against rising energy and living costs’, respectively) if one were organized in your vicinity?’

We use several indicators to examine how trust relates to democracy. These indicators allow us to measure the size of the perceived ‘democratic deficit’ (Norris, 2011) and the respondents’ attitudes towards democracy in a nuanced way. First, we asked respondents about their democratic beliefs and their evaluation of democracy in Germany inspired by the ESS batteries on this (Ferrín & Kriesi, 2016). We used three questions to capture the ‘liberal’ and the ‘electoral’ elements of democracy respectively; and for each of these questions we differentiate between normative elements that ‘democracy should entail’ and elements that ‘democracy in Germany entails’. The six variables will be described in more detail in the following section. Taken together, these variables allow us to precisely determine the size of the perceived ‘democratic deficit’ in Germany as defined by Norris (1999, 2011) and to relate it to different ‘trust’ groups. Second, we use the three indicators suggested by Christensen (2016) to measure the respondents’ democratic disposition: political deprivation, satisfaction with democracy and preferences for direct democracy. Political deprivation is measured through an average score using three items that ask survey respondents on the agreement level with the statements: ‘People like me don’t have any influence on what the government does anyway’; ‘My rights only exist on paper’; and ‘I feel powerless in dealing with authorities’ (7-point scale each). Satisfaction with democracy is measured by approval of the statement ‘How satisfied are you overall with the way democracy functions in Germany’ (7-point scale). We capture preferences for direct democracy by the approval of the statement ‘Citizens should be able to initiate a binding national referendum at the federal level’ (7-point scale).

Finally, we analyse the respondents' political positions and ideological dispositions by using three different measures. First, the respondents' ideological position is captured through a standard 11-point scale question on left-right self-positioning. Second, we aim at a more nuanced assessment by positioning the respondents' ideological profiles in the transformed two-dimensional political space identified by Kriesi *et al.* (2008, 2012) in North-West European countries. For this purpose, we make use of three preference items which represent those issues which are constitutive for the two main dimensions of political conflict, the cultural-identitarian and the socio-economic dimensions. The 'cultural-identitarian' cleavage is covered by two issues, namely (limiting) 'immigration' and 'new cultural liberalism' (more specifically, the approval of homosexual life); the 'socio-economic' cleavage is captured by the issue of 'economic liberalism', which refers to limiting the intervening role of the state in the national economy (for an exact wording of the questions see the Online Appendix A1). Third, we use the respondents' party vote intention for the six parties represented in the national parliament to relate the respondents' ideological dispositions to established political parties and to their electoral behaviour.

We analyse the survey data by employing a two-fold strategy: partly we present descriptive statistics and partly regression analyses. We illustrate many of the different analyses by presenting absolute differences between the *distrustful* group of individuals (no trust) compared with two other groups with low trust and high trust. These three groups were formed based on the following values on our political trust scale: the distrustful group (no trust) = 0; the 'low trust' group = 1–5; and the 'high trust' group = 6–10.³ For regression analyses on continuous variables, we implement an OLS specification and present predicted values of political trust based on different independent variables. When examining the determinants of reported protest behaviour, we implement logit regressions, as previous protest scholars have done (Rüdig & Karyotis, 2014). In these cases, we present predicted probabilities.

Empirical results

The size of the trust deficit

Is there a deficit in political trust in Germany driving mobilisation potential of recent protest movements? In the following, we show descriptive data on trust in government, in parliament, and in other public institutions from our surveys. Figure 2 (Panel A) shows the distribution of trust in government in the two crises on an 11-point scale. We find the by far largest group not in the centre but at one end of the spectrum. These are what we call in the following the *distrustful citizens*, i.e., those who have no trust at all in the Federal

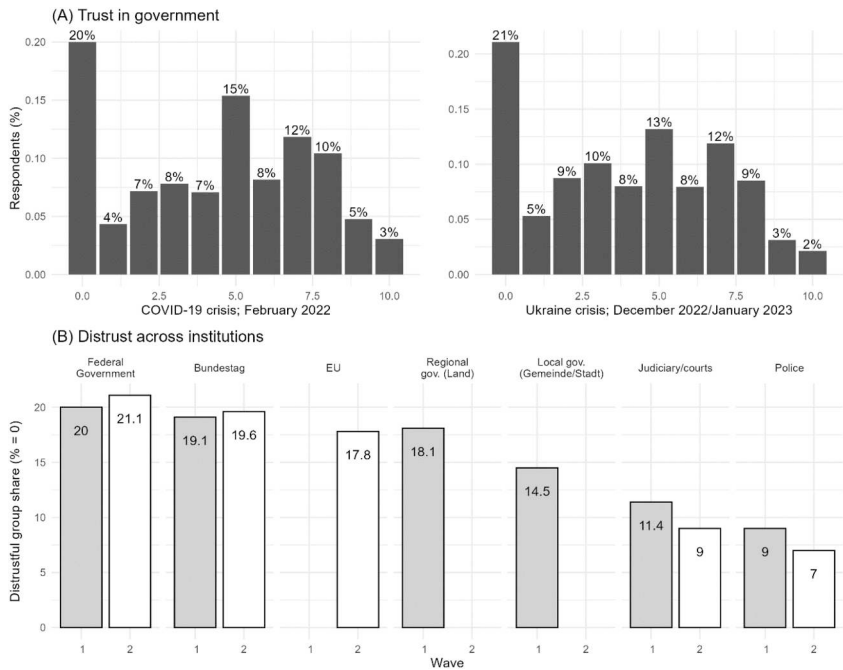


Figure 2. Trust in the German government and across institutions during two crises, 2022 and 2023.

Note: Panel B shows the share of ‘no trust’ respondents, namely respondents indicating the lowest level of trust in the item-scale (= 0). The scales encompass values from 0 to 10. Wave 1 refers to the COVID-19 crisis (February 2022), wave 2 to the Ukraine crisis (December 2022/January 2023). Table A5 in the Online Appendix A2 includes size groups, means and, additionally, trust in other institutions such as media and political parties.

government. During the two crises, 20 per cent (COVID-19) and 21 per cent (Ukraine) of the respondents have no confidence in the government (= 0). These figures are indicative that there is a sizable group of ‘distrustful citizens’ in Germany. They also suggest that average values for the entire population systematically underestimate the size of the trust deficit within the German political system (see Table A5 in the Online Appendix A2). The comparison of both crises shows an almost identical pattern of distribution. In both cases, a group of respondents with no trust of more or less the same size stands out.

A comparison with trust in the national parliament (‘Bundestag’) reveals a very similar pattern (Figure 2, Panel B). Although distrust in parliament is slightly lower than in government, the difference is very small, and the distribution of trust levels is virtually the same as for trust in government (see Figure A6 in Online Appendix A2). In both crises, around 20 per cent of the respondents have no trust at all in the national parliament. Apparently, the lack of political trust affects the two core institutions of representative

democracy, parliament and government, to the same extent. This suggests that the lack of political trust is not primarily dependent on government performance.⁴

Our analysis also reveals that citizens' lack of trust affects *political* institutions more generally. Both the EU and regional governments have similar distrust levels among the citizenry (Figure 2, Panel B). The fact that distrust in other levels of government is only marginally lower than that of the Federal government (and the national parliament) can be interpreted as supporting our assumption that neither partisan motives nor the performance of a specific government are decisive factors in the assessment of political trust. Citizens are, however, capable of differentiating democratically accountable institutions from other state institutions. As ample research has shown, political distrust in state institutions, such as the judiciary and the police, is significantly lower (on average, 10.2 and 8 per cent, respectively) than for the different levels of government and the national parliament (see also Table A5 in the Online Appendix A2).

In sum, it is primarily the core institutions of representative democracy that are affected by citizens' lack of trust. Whether the object of distrust is government or parliament, whether the government is led by the SPD or the CDU, there is a distinct and sizeable group of citizens with extremely negative attitudes. In 2022, every fifth German citizen had no trust whatsoever in the Federal government and in the national parliament. Does this lack of political trust motivate protest?

Political distrust and political protest

In the following analysis of the consequences of political distrust for protest, we focus in particular on the group of 'distrustful citizens', which we identified in the first step. We define this group in the most restrictive way by including only those respondents which have no trust at all in government (= 0 on our scale). Is this group of distrustful citizens more likely to sympathise with and willing to participate in the protests under scrutiny?

We explore the consequences of political distrust on the basis of our surveys on protest disposition of the two protest movements. It is important to emphasise that the object of our analysis is not the demonstrator in the street, but the mobilisation potential of the COVID-19 protest and the 'energy protests' more broadly, which we assess in our surveys. To determine the magnitude of this mobilisation potential, we use two measures: (1) the *respondents' sympathy for the protest*, namely the COVID-19 protest and the 'energy protests'; and (2) their *general willingness to participate* in these protests. This provides important insight into the disposition for protest action. Whether political movements actually succeed in activating and exploiting this potential is a different question. To explore this mobilisation potential,

we proceed in two steps. First, we inspect how political trust determines the sympathy with the protest and the willingness to protest on average with logit models and plot predicted probabilities. Second, we compare more specifically how the group of individuals with 'no trust' compares with the groups of respondents with 'low' and 'high' trust.

Our data reveals that there was a significant mobilisation potential in both crises, even if the two crises differ markedly in the size of this potential and in the ability of protest movements to exploit it. In absolute terms, public support for the 'energy protest' was substantively higher than for the COVID-19 protest. In February 2022, at the peak of the political controversy over mandatory vaccination, 23 per cent of the respondents had 'a lot' or 'some' sympathy for the COVID-19 protest, and 16 per cent were '(very) likely' to participate in such protest. By contrast, 68 per cent strongly sympathised with the 'energy protests' in December 2022/January 2023; and 35 per cent were willing to participate (see Figures A12 and A13 in the Online Appendix A4). In light of these numbers, it is quite remarkable that the protest movement in the 'Ukraine crisis' did not succeed to exploit this potential and to massively mobilise protesters.

Figure 3 shows how trust in the Federal government relates to the disposition to protest across the two crises. Our analysis clearly shows that distrust matters, but we also find remarkable differences between the two crises and protest movements. In the case of the COVID-19 protest, trust in government largely determines sympathy for the protest as well as the willingness to participate. The predicted probability of individuals with 'no trust' in government to express sympathy for the COVID-19 protest is 0.55, whereas individuals with high levels of trust (from 6 to 10 in the 11-points trust scale) are almost certainly unlikely to sympathise with the protest with probabilities ranging from 0.10–0.02. Similarly, very distrustful individuals are more willing to protest (predicted probability of 0.36), whereas very trustful individuals are certainly not willing to protest.

Protest during the 'Ukraine crisis' shows a different picture. In the case of 'energy protest', trust in the government is not as important for determining sympathy with or willingness to participate as for the COVID-19 protests. Yet, very distrustful individuals are still 1.2 times more likely to sympathise with the 'energy protest' than very trustful individuals (predicted probabilities: 0.72 vs 0.62–0.55, respectively). On average, distrustful individuals are also 1.5 times more likely to be willing to participate at 'energy protests' than very trustful individuals (0.38 vs 0.24). These differences are, however, substantially less relevant as for the COVID-19 protests.

Finally, we examine the protest disposition of the three 'trust groups'. Our findings (see Tables A6 and A7 in Online Appendix A3) show that the group of distrustful citizens is substantially different from the 'low trust' group and the 'high trust' group with regard to their protest disposition. In the case of the

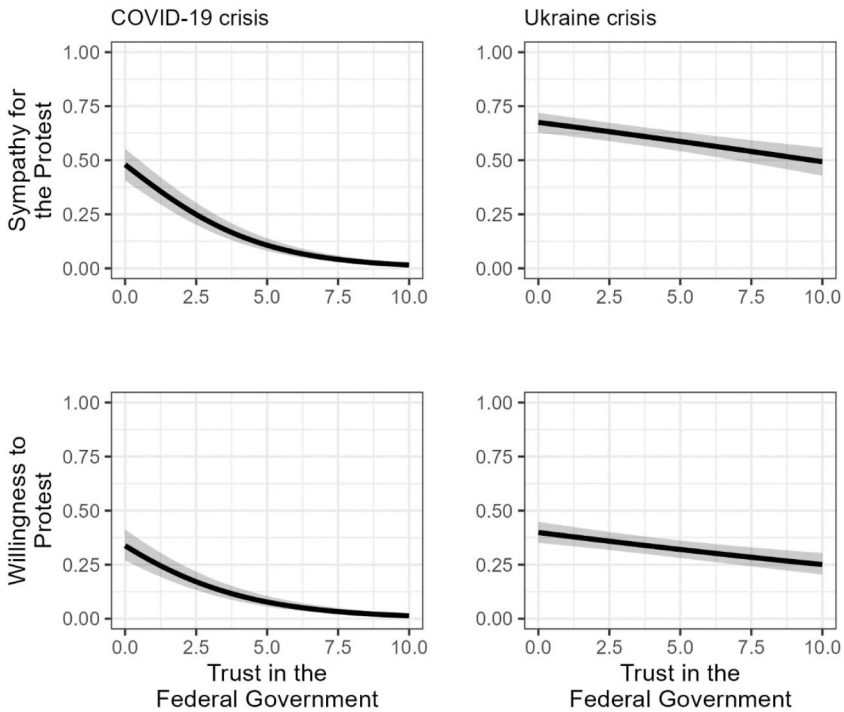


Figure 3. Political distrust and political protest.

Note: The figures depict predicted probabilities based on logit models. Models control for gender (female/diverse), age, age², education level (categorical), current economic situation, children (dummy), Eastern Germany, ideological self-positioning and its second polynomial; the remaining covariates are mean-centred when computing the predicted probabilities. Grey area reflects 0.95 confidence interval. See full models in Table A8, Online Appendix A3.

COVID-19 protest, 58.7 per cent of the ‘no trust’ group had ‘some’ or ‘a lot’ of sympathy for the protests. In the other two groups, sympathy was clearly lower with 19.8 per cent for the ‘low trust’ and 7.5 per cent for the ‘high trust’ group. Similarly, 42 per cent of the respondents with ‘no trust’ were willing to participate (‘low trust’: 12.9 per cent; ‘high trust’: 4.6 per cent). These are remarkable differences even between the ‘no trust’ and ‘low trust’ groups. As could be expected based on [Figure 3](#), in the case of ‘energy protests’ the differences between the three groups are not quite as contrasting. Most importantly, 45.6 per cent of the respondents with ‘no trust’ were willing to participate in the ‘energy protests’, as compared to 34.2 and 30.2 per cent of the individuals with ‘low trust’ and ‘high trust’ in government, respectively.

In sum, in the case of the COVID-19 protests, a clear correlation is evident between lacking political trust and the disposition to participate in the protests. From this perspective, the COVID-19 protests could definitely be interpreted as a ‘revolt of the distrustful’: respondents with less trust in the

government were more likely to participate in the protests. In the 'Ukraine crisis', there was also a large group of respondents with no political trust; however, there was a large mobilisation potential across different trust levels.

Political distrust and the democratic deficit

Is the mobilisation of distrustful citizens in recent German protest movements a cause for concern? Are these protests a threat to democracy? In the third part of our empirical analysis, we address these questions in three steps. First, we explore whether the lack of political trust can be related to a 'democratic deficit' (e.g., Norris, 2011); second, we examine the distrustful citizens' attitudes towards democracy more specifically; and, finally, we analyse their political orientations.

Is there a 'democratic deficit' in the German political system and how does it relate to political trust? In our second survey in early 2023, we asked respondents about their democratic beliefs and their evaluation of democracy in Germany. These questions were inspired by the ESS batteries (Kriesi *et al.*, 2016). They differentiate between liberal and electoral elements of democracy on the one hand; and normative beliefs and subjective evaluations of these elements on the other hand. The 'liberal' elements of democracy include minority protection, media freedom and equality before the law; the 'electoral' elements refer to the vertical accountability of political authority, free and fair elections, and electoral competition. A 'democratic deficit', i.e., a 'gap between aspirations and satisfaction' (Norris, 2011, p. 5) then can result from differences between normative expectations and empirical evaluations on each of these six elements.

Our empirical results on this are highly instructive. Most important, the lack of trust in political institutions clearly goes along with strong perceptions of a 'democratic deficit'. Figure 4 shows striking differences between the three 'trust groups' in the empirical evaluation of the state of democracy vis-à-vis normative beliefs. It is the distrustful citizens who perceive a huge difference between the normative ideal of democracy and its actual performance (mean difference in predicted values across evaluations: 3.3 in the 11-point scale), while members of the 'high trust' group hardly recognise such a difference (mean differences: 0.8). The difference between these two groups cannot be explained by the fact that the distrustful citizens have too high normative aspirations. Quite the opposite, their predicted values of normative elements (7.4) is significantly lower than that of the 'high trust' group (8.2). Apparently, the distrustful citizens in our survey show exactly the characteristics of the group of 'critical citizens' as described in the literature. This group 'aspires to democracy as their ideal form of government, at the same time they remain deeply sceptical when evaluating how democracy works in their own country' (Norris, 2011, p. 5).

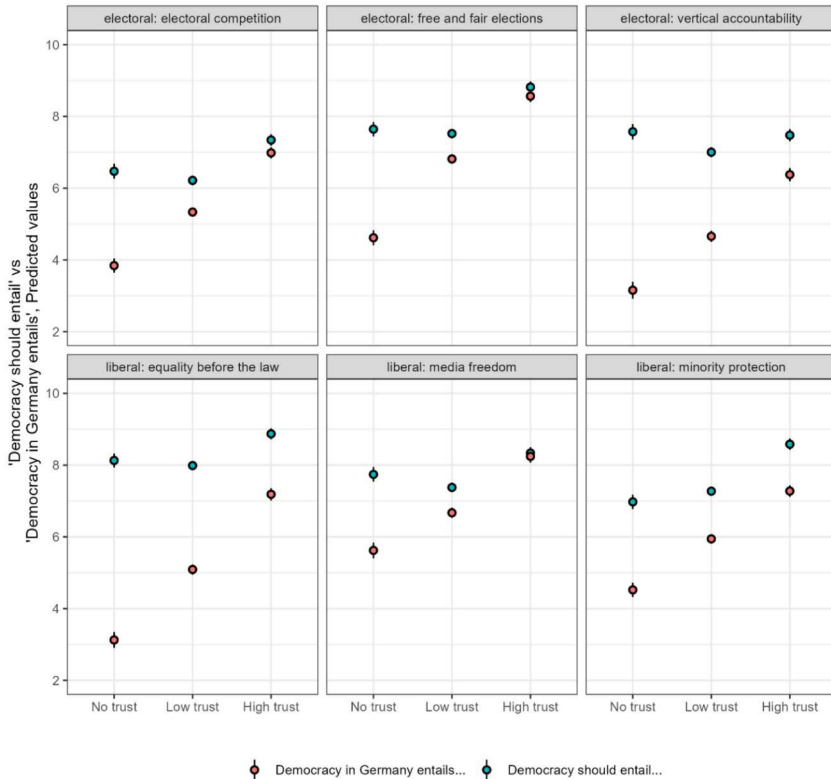


Figure 4. Democratic beliefs and evaluation of democracy in Germany.

Note: Predicted values of normative beliefs about democracy and subjective evaluations (0–10) based on 12 individual regressions. Survey analysis during the Ukraine crisis, wave 2 – December 2022/January 2023 ($N = 2,818$). OLS regression controlling for gender, age, education level, current economic situation, children (dummy), Eastern Germany (dummy), left-right ideological self-placement. The remaining covariates are mean-centred when computing the predicted values. Error bars reflect 0.95 confidence intervals.

Comparison with the 'low trust' group confirms our assumption that the distrustful citizens should be treated as a distinct member of the 'trust family'. The overall value for the 'low trust' group's perceived 'democratic deficit' (mean differences: 1.5 vs. 3.3) is clearly lower than the value for the 'no trust' group, although their normative aspirations are slightly lower than those of the distrustful citizens (mean score: 7.2 vs. 7.4).

Is this 'no trust' group, which perceives a 'democratic deficit', a reason for hope or a cause for concern? In Table 1, we examine the association between political trust as an independent variable and three indicators, which represent different dimensions of political dissatisfaction, as suggested by Christensen (2016): political deprivation, satisfaction with democracy, and support for direct democracy. First, models 1 and 2 in Table 1 show that there is a strong relationship between trust in government and political deprivation.

Table 1. Attitudinal correlates of political trust.

	Dependent variables:					
	Political deprivation		Satisfaction with democracy		Pro direct democracy	
	COVID-19 crisis (1)	Ukraine crisis (2)	COVID-19 crisis (3)	Ukraine crisis (4)	COVID-19 crisis (5)	Ukraine crisis (6)
Left-Right	0.11*** (0.02)	0.12*** (0.01)	−0.05*** (0.01)	−0.04*** (0.01)	0.06*** (0.02)	0.05*** (0.02)
Trust Federal Gov.	−0.22*** (0.01)	−0.19*** (0.01)	0.38*** (0.01)	0.35*** (0.01)	−0.14*** (0.01)	−0.12*** (0.01)
Socio- demographics	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eastern Germany	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Constant	5.20*** (0.22)	5.70*** (0.18)	2.10*** (0.20)	2.30*** (0.16)	4.50*** (0.26)	5.00*** (0.21)
Obs.	2,035	2,818	2,035	2,818	2,035	2,818
R ²	0.35	0.29	0.55	0.49	0.13	0.08
Adjusted R ²	0.35	0.28	0.54	0.48	0.13	0.08
Residual Std. Error	1.30 (df = 2025)	1.30 (df = 2808)	1.10 (df = 2025)	1.20 (df = 2808)	1.50 (df = 2025)	1.60 (df = 2808)
F Statistic	123.00*** (df = 9; 2025)	130.00*** (df = 9; 2808)	271.00*** (df = 9; 2025)	296.00*** (df = 9; 2808)	33.00*** (df = 9; 2025)	29.00*** (df = 9; 2808)

Note: Levels of statistical significance: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. The coefficients are comparable across models since the dependent variables have equivalent 7-point scales. Full model in Table A9 in Online Appendix A5.

Respondents with no trust in government, specifically, also have a strong sense of political deprivation. We find this association in both crises and regardless of the respondents' political positioning. Furthermore, in our descriptive analysis we find that in both crises a group of approximately 31 per cent denounce an insufficient political influence (>5; see Figure A18 in Online Appendix A6).

Our results also show that the feeling of political deprivation goes along with low satisfaction with democracy, as portrayed in models 3 and 4. By comparing the coefficient sizes, it is clear that the association between political trust and satisfaction with democracy is the strongest one. In both crises, an absolute average of 13 per cent of the respondents were completely unsatisfied with how democracy works (= 1 on the 7-point scale). Hence, the problem of trust which promotes the disposition to protest results from the toxic combination identified by Christensen (2016), namely of lacking trust in the core institutions of representative democracy on the one hand and the complaint about insufficient political influence and a lack of satisfaction with democracy on the other hand.

Such an interpretation is supported by our last finding on the respondents' attitude towards direct democracy (models 5 and 6 in Table 1). Our analysis clearly indicates that the respondents see the solution to the perceived 'democratic deficit' in the introduction or strengthening of a direct, participatory democracy. The less individuals trust in the Federal government, the more they support the implementation of direct democracy as an alternative to parliamentary democracy. With regard to the democratic deficit, it is not the case that distrustful citizens prefer an authoritarian system over democracy, but rather that they advocate for a different form of democracy. The crucial question then is whether the distrustful citizens are in favour of a progressive advancement of democracy or of regressive forms such as 'illiberal democracy'. We attempt to answer this question by examining the political attitudes of distrustful citizens more closely.

At first sight, our findings seem to align well with the progressive image of the 'critical citizen', for whom, in line with Inglehart's theory of post-materialist value change, the primary focus is on self-efficacy and the expansion of opportunities for political participation beyond the electoral arena (Inglehart, 1977, 1990, 2008; Norris, 1999, 2011; Norris *et al.*, 2005). In the light of this theory, low political trust and the existence of a large group of distrustful citizens would primarily indicate significant potential for progressive political reforms in Germany rather than a threat to democracy.

However, our analysis of the political orientations of the group of distrustful citizens suggests caution against such optimism. Our data allows an in-depth analysis of their ideological orientations and political positions by using three different measuring instruments.

First, we locate the distrustful citizens *on the left-right scale*. Are we dealing with a ‘distrustful political middle ground’ (*misstrauische Mitte*)? Or is the lack of political trust linked to an extreme political orientation? Most apparent: The distrustful citizens predominantly locate themselves in the political centre. Around 75 per cent of them position themselves in the middle of the left-right scale. Hence, a lack of political trust is not necessarily a manifestation of politically extreme positions. This is not to say, however, that there are no important differences between the three groups. As outlined in models 1 and 2 of Table 2, individuals with a right-leaning orientation exhibit a tendency to have lower trust in the government. Upon revisiting the group with ‘no trust’, 14 per cent expressed right-wing positions during the COVID-19 crisis, and 15 per cent did so during the ‘Ukraine crisis’.⁵ In the ‘low trust’ category, only 5 per cent in both crises held right-wing views. Notably, only 3 and 6 per cent of individuals classified under ‘high trust’ reported right-wing positions during the respective crises (see full distributions in Table A12 and Figure A17 in the Online Appendix A4). Among individuals with no trust, the ideological distribution is rather skewed to the right as compared to the two other groups.

Second, we identify the *positioning of the distrustful citizens in the two-dimensional political space*. As shown by several scholars (Kriesi *et al.*, 2008, 2012; Marks *et al.*, 2021), political conflict in North-West European countries, including Germany, has been characterised by two main cleavages since the 1990s, a socio-economic and a cultural-identitarian conflict. As a result, political conflict in these countries takes place in a two-dimensional competitive space in which the old ‘left’ and ‘right’ categories lose some of their meaningfulness. Our questions on the most important new ‘cleavage issues’ (including

Table 2. Political correlates of trust in government.

	Dependent variable: trust in the Federal Government			
	COVID-19 crisis (1)	Ukraine crisis (2)	COVID-19 crisis (3)	Ukraine crisis (4)
Left-right	−26.00*** (2.90)	−26.00*** (2.80)		
Left-right 2	−9.00*** (2.90)	−9.40*** (2.80)		
Immigration			−0.38*** (0.03)	−0.42*** (0.03)
New cultural liberalism			0.17*** (0.04)	0.21*** (0.05)
Economic liberalism			−0.30*** (0.04)	−0.28*** (0.03)
Socio-demographics	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eastern Germany	✓	✓	✓	✓
Constant	2.20*** (0.33)	1.90*** (0.25)	4.40*** (0.37)	4.20*** (0.28)
Observations	2,035	2,818	2,035	2,818
R ²	0.14	0.15	0.20	0.24
Adjusted R ²	0.14	0.14	0.20	0.24
Residual Std. Error	2.80 (df = 2024)	2.70 (df = 2807)	2.70 (df = 2023)	2.60 (df = 2806)
F Statistic	33.00*** (df = 10; 2024)	48.00*** (df = 10; 2807)	47.00*** (df = 11; 2023)	81.00*** (df = 11; 2806)

Note: Levels of statistical significance: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. Full models in Appendix Table A10, Online Appendix A5

immigration) allow us to locate the respondents in the new conflict space that has emerged as a consequence of economic, political and cultural denationalization. In our context, the question then is how the distrustful citizens situate themselves in this conflict space and whether they form a clearly identifiable group there. Turning our attention to models 3 and 4 in Table 2, we explore how the two dimensions of political conflict relate to political trust. The results show that both culturally restrictive positions, as well as economically liberal stances, are negatively related to political trust. In other words, individuals who favour the restrictions and limitation of immigration, on the one hand, and who oppose state interventions in economic matters, on the other, are less likely to trust the Federal government. Furthermore, new cultural-liberal positions (e.g., on homosexual rights) are positively and significantly associated with trust in government. That is, individuals supporting a homosexual life as part of society are more likely to trust the government. In short, distrustful citizens combine culturally illiberal and nationalist attitudes.

Third, we investigate how political trust is related to *party affiliation*. Do ‘distrustful citizens’ express clear preferences for an established political party? Following the ideological self-placement of individuals with a lack of trust and Kitschelt’s (1995; see De Lange, 2016) ‘winning formula’, we would expect that distrustful citizens will tend to prefer radical-right populist parties which combine culturally restrictive and economically liberal positions. Figure 5 depicts the predicted level of trust by partisan group. The predicted point estimates are based on analogue models as in Table 2, in which we substitute the ideological determinants with party preferences. The results show that there are clear differences across partisan groups in terms

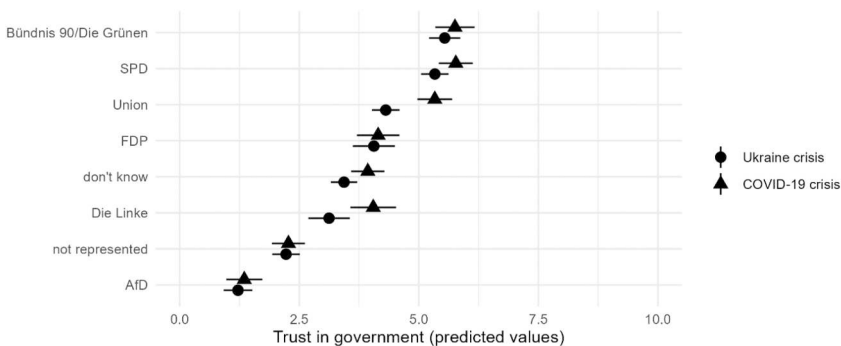


Figure 5. Political trust in government across partisan groups.

Note: Point estimates reflect predicted values based on OLS regression as in the models of Table 2 by replacing political determinants with categorical party vote (see full regression models in Table A11 in Online Appendix A5). The remaining covariates are mean-centred when computing the predicted point estimates. Error bars represent 0.95 confidence intervals; descending order of trust across partisan groups based on predicted trust levels during wave 1.

of political trust in government. Most important, political trust is especially low among supporters of the radical-right populist AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) and in the group of politically 'not-represented' individuals, which includes especially non-voters, but also voters of small parties without seats in the national parliament. Taken together, these are the 'disenchanted citizens' who are alienated from mainstream parties (Norris *et al.*, 2005) and detached from the political system (Dassonneville & McAllister, 2021). Their lack of political trust is consequential with regard to voting behaviour, but it can lead to both, a vote for a radical or outsider party and to political abstention, to 'voice' as well as to 'exit'. On the opposite side of the Figure, we find that political trust is exceptionally high among the supporters of the Green Party and the social-democratic SPD, with above-average predicted levels of trust of almost 7 points. Green Party voters in particular are distinct from the supporters of other parties due to their high trust in government.⁶ Not the least, Figure 5 reveals that the relationship between political trust and party affiliation does not differ between crises (waves 1 and 2). Only supporters of the Left Party and the Christian-Democratic parties had greater trust in the government in the COVID-19 pandemic.

These findings are clear evidence that political trust is particularly low among supporters of the radical-right populist AfD and politically not yet (or no longer) represented individuals (non-voters, among others). This contradicts the common notion that the introduction of 'participatory democracy' is primarily a goal of left-wing parties and progressive political movements (exemplified by della Porta, 2013, 2020). Demands for a 'real democracy' cannot only be found in left-wing and radical left protest movements as, for example, the Indignados and Occupy (della Porta & Reiter, 2012); they are shared by radical right movements meanwhile too (Ranstorp & Ahlin, 2019). In Germany, the slogan 'More democracy!' (*Mehr Demokratie wagen!*), which has been the motto of left-wing reform politics in the late 1960s and early 1970s, has been hijacked by the radical-right populist AfD in recent election campaigns.

Conclusion: political trust, protest, and democracy

The diverse new protest movements that have emerged in the course of the various crises in Europe are a very instructive object of study, not only for scholars of political protest and social movement research. Focusing on two recent movements in Germany, the COVID-19 protest and the 'energy protest', our empirical analysis provides several new insights on the relationship between political trust and political protest and the consequences of political distrust for democracy. First of all, during both crises, we identified a sizeable group of distrustful citizens, that is, citizens with no trust at all in the core institutions of representative democracy. In the most conservative

interpretation of our data, in 2022 about 20 per cent of German citizens had no trust at all in government and parliament. This is a clear indication that there is a substantial trust deficit in the German political system.

Second, our analysis of mobilisation potentials provides evidence that distrust matters with regard to political protest. Distrust does not lead to civic disengagement and political apathy. Rather, the distrustful citizens exhibit an above-average disposition for protest. Against this background, the most recent protest movements in Germany can well be interpreted as a 'revolt of the distrustful'. This does not imply that these protest movements were solely driven by distrustful citizens. The protest potential in the 'Ukraine crisis' illustrates that the sympathy for this protest extends far beyond the group of distrustful individuals. This aligns with the findings of surveys conducted by Daphi *et al.* (2023) who show that in the German protest movements of the past two decades, protesters with high political trust are also present.

Third, our analysis suggests that distrust and protest disposition on the occasion of the most recent German protest movements can be interpreted as manifestations of a 'democratic deficit' in contemporary Germany. The findings show that it is in particular the group of distrustful citizens which perceives a strong discrepancy between democratic principles and ideals and the democratic reality. Apparently, the mobilisation potential for political protest in Germany in the two crises includes a large number of 'disenchanted citizens', as defined by Christensen (2016), which combine low or lacking political trust with a strong sense of political deprivation. According to Christensen, this type of political dissatisfaction is the most serious threat to democracy.

Although the distrustful citizens criticise political deprivation and a lack of political influence, they are not against democracy as such. Rather, they advocate an alternative model of democracy based on direct democratic participation opportunities, similar to citizens with low trust in the Australian case (Dassonneville & McAllister, 2021). At first glance, the identified distrustful citizens appear to be nothing else than a variety of the 'critical citizen' as portrayed in the literature (Fuchs & Klingemann, 1995; Norris, 1999, 2011), who has been viewed as the main proponent of progressive political reform movements.

Our empirical findings give reason to doubt such an optimistic assessment, however. Once we study the political orientations of the distrustful citizens in more detail, it becomes clear that these are clearly distinct from the attributes of enlightened post-materialists. Rather, they exhibit political attitudes reminiscent of voters of radical-right populist parties (Kitschelt, 1995; Kriesi *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, it is not coincidental that the distrustful citizens in Germany are overrepresented among the voters of the radical-right populist AfD (and

among non-voters), even if they do not self-identify to the extreme poles of the political spectrum.

Taken together, there are good reasons to be distrustful towards the distrustful citizens which we identified in the most recent German protest movements. They are politically active beyond the electoral arena and they support a different, more demanding democracy, akin to what is typical for progressive political movements (see, e.g., della Porta, 2020; Ouattara & van der Meer, 2023). At the same time, however, they hold illiberal and restrictive attitudes towards minorities and migrants, characteristic of regressive political movements. In a sense, they represent a regressive variant of the 'critical citizen' (Norris, 1999, 2011); and they exemplify the possibility of a pathological exaggeration of 'counter-democracy' (Rosanvallon, 2008).

With our study, we have made an empirical contribution to making the 'elusive concept' of political trust more tangible and establishing a direct connection to mobilisation potential during two specific crises. This way, our study allows us to better understand the relationship between trust, protest and democratic attitudes. These findings could also stimulate further research on the new type of protest movements which has emerged in Europe in recent years. Most importantly, it would be important to delve more deeply into the group of distrustful citizens, e.g., by investigating their visions and understanding of democracy more granularly. Similarly, the literature can benefit from understanding better the conditions under which the mobilisation potential can be activated, for example by investigating behavioural patterns at protest events and linking them to mobilising actors from different ideological camps. Our two case studies suggest that there can be huge differences in the ability of movements to exploit existing mobilisation potentials. Not the least, our understanding of distrustful citizens and their political behaviour would certainly benefit from comparative analyses of more recent protest movements across Europe and of their development over time as well as from causal approaches to the study of political trust.

Notes

1. The survey studies were ethically approved by the IRB at the WZB Berlin Social Science Center: approval numbers 2022-1-139 and 2022-11-186.
2. Online Appendix A1 shows a more detailed description of the survey items, their operationalisation and some additional descriptive statistics.
3. In Appendix A2, we present a k-means clustering analysis of the political trust scale in order to endogenously identify the three different trust groups. The analysis confirms our operationalisation of the three trust groups, which also reflects the groups of the 'distrustful', 'mistrustful' and 'trustful' citizens presented in the theory.
4. Furthermore, the main analyses are replicated with a focus on political trust in the national parliament (*Bundestag*) in Online Appendix A7. The results for trust

in parliament reflect the same dynamics and inferences as for trust in government.

5. In the ideological scale ranging from 1 to 11, we categorise responses ranging from 1 to 3 as left-wing positions, and responses from 9 to 11 as right-wing positions. Individuals positioning themselves between 4 and 8 in the scale are categorised as centrist or 'in the middle' (see full distributions in Figure A17 in the Online Appendix A5).
6. This is consistent with the findings of Daphi et al. (2023). In their analysis of protest in Germany they predominantly found participants with very high levels of political trust, as their sample of protest events includes a number of issues (e.g., peace, environment) on which new social movements, which have tended to green parties in the past, mobilise.

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Data availability statement

The data and replication code that support the findings of this study are available via the Harvard Dataverse: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/WVB7ET>.

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