



Antecedents of political trust in adolescence: Cognitive abilities and perceptions of parents



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ABSTRACT

This study examined the predictors of political trust in late adolescence. Three waves of longitudinal data (ages 11, 15, and 17) from 1116 Czech adolescents (346 participated at least in the first and last wave) were analyzed using structural equation modeling. Results showed that high verbal cognitive ability in early adolescence predicted greater political trust in late adolescence. This effect was explained by adolescents' greater cognitive political engagements, but not by their more positive relationships with authorities (e.g., school or parents) during adolescence. Next, early adolescents who perceived more parental warmth demonstrated greater political trust when they reached late adolescence. These results suggest that some young people might enter adulthood more skeptical regarding politics based on their abilities and early nonpolitical experiences.

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Adolescents construct various expectations and beliefs about the world of politics that affect their civic activities (Sherrod, Torney-Purta, & Flanagan, 2010). Political trust, defined broadly as the perceived trustworthiness of the political environment and authorities regarding whether politicians observe the rules and serve the public (Citrin & Muste, 1999), represents an important part of a young person's worldview. For instance, a lack of political trust during adolescence can result in low interest in politics and voting (Bynner & Ashford, 1994), or in the development of a preference for nonconventional political activities (Bandura, 1997; Beaumont, 2010). From a macro-level perspective, citizens' political trust is embedded in the broader political culture of a country (Almond & Verba, 1963; Inglehart, 1997), is partially derived from the social norms and interpersonal trust present in that society (Putnam, 2000), and is associated with citizens' assessments of the actual performance of political authorities (Mishler & Rose, 2001). In addition, psychological research has revealed that political trust can also reflect individual adolescents' histories. Research has shown that parental authoritarian practices (Gniewosz, Noack, & Buhl, 2009), adolescents' cognitive abilities (Schoon & Cheng, 2011), and educational performance (Bynner & Ashford, 1994) are associated with levels of political trust or alienation. However, these developmental hypotheses have not been tested in one comprehensive model that includes early perceptions of parents, cognitive abilities, and subsequent relations to authorities (school and parents). This study employed longitudinal

data covering a six-year period to study predictors of political trust in late adolescence.

Political trust refers to the evaluation of individual politicians, governments, or institutions; however, it can also refer to generalized beliefs about the political environment as a whole (Citrin & Muste, 1999). In the current study, we drew on the latter concept of political trust. We understood political trust as being the opposite of political cynicism, which is defined as a generalized mistrust not of particular politicians, but of the politicians in general. According to this definition, people with low political trust perceive political environment as corrupting its participants and attracting corrupt persons (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). The lack of political trust can be also understood as one component of political alienation (besides the lack of political efficacy or powerlessness), and is sometimes referred to as political normlessness (Finifter, 1970; Levi & Stoker, 2000). Our understanding of political trust stems from cognitive conceptions of interpersonal trust that define trust as the set of personal assumptions, beliefs and expectations that other people behave beneficially (or at least not detrimentally) to one's interest (Kramer & Carnevale, 2001). Particularly in the situations of lacking personal contact, these assumptions, beliefs and expectations can be generalized to a whole social category such as politicians (Offe, 1999).

Previous studies have reported that people with greater political trust have greater cognitive abilities. In large-scale longitudinal studies, general cognitive ability in early adolescence was found to be positively associated with political trust in adulthood (Deary, Batty, & Gale, 2008; Schoon & Cheng, 2011; Schoon, Cheng, Gale, Batty, & Deary, 2010). Additionally, researchers have found that political trust is positively

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associated with openness to experience (Mondak & Halperin, 2008), which is a relatively stable personality trait that is linked (although not identical) to verbal cognitive ability (McCrae & Sutin, 2009). Further, some researchers have considered that attained education level is a manifestation of cognitive abilities (Rindermann, 2008). In this respect, there is some evidence to support a positive association between adolescents' education levels and their political trust (Henn, Weinstein, & Forrest, 2005); however, other studies on the general population have not found such support (see Catterberg & Moreno, 2006). To summarize, political trust seems to be positively associated with cognitive ability, particularly concerning verbal aspects.

The association between political trust and cognitive ability can have several explanations. Regarding political trust in adulthood, achieved social status and income level are potential explanatory mechanisms. More precisely, higher cognitive abilities in childhood positively predict higher social status and income in adulthood, which are associated with higher political trust (Schoon & Cheng, 2011). However, this explanation is not sufficient in explaining the political trust of late adolescents who typically do not have a stable income and a definite future social status, but already have a relatively stable sense of political trust (Claes, Hooghe, & Marien, 2012; Hooghe & Wilkenfeld, 2008).

Some scholars have suggested that a basis for social trust in adolescence develops from everyday nonpolitical experiences in small proximal communities (Flanagan, 2003). This notion can apply also to political trust as research has shown that, for adolescents, strong connections to their parents, schools, and neighborhoods predict greater political trust in young adulthood (Duke, Skay, Pettingell, & Borowsky, 2009). As such, we proposed that these processes might serve as a link between adolescents' cognitive abilities and political trust. Specifically, we hypothesized that adolescents with different levels of cognitive abilities have different developmental experiences in their schools and families, which can influence political trust. In other words, the effect of cognitive abilities on political trust can be mediated through developmental experiences in schools and families.

First, adolescents with greater cognitive abilities are more likely to develop positive relationships to school during their maturation, which can generalize to other social institutions, such as politics. This notion is supported by research that has shown that children and adolescents with higher general cognitive abilities report more positive relationships to school (Geddes, Murrell, & Bauguss, 2010; Richards, Encel, & Shute, 2003). Consequently, based on the public institutional hypothesis, positive relations to school can generalize to politics. This hypothesis assumes that adolescents' political attitudes and activities are shaped by their experiences with public institutions, such as schools (Amadeo, Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Husfeldt, & Nikolova, 2002; Amnå & Zetterberg, 2010). Specifically, schools are usually adolescents' first opportunities to learn how institutional systems of authority work and what to expect from them (Estévez & Emler, 2009). These experiences can shape later perceptions of other institutions in the public realm, including political authorities. Data from different countries support this notion as middle adolescents' trust in and positive perceptions of school are associated with their trust in governmental institutions (Torney-Purta, Barber, & Richardson, 2004).

Second, adolescents with better cognitive abilities tend to have positive relationships with parents, which can generalize to politics. Research has shown that a child's language competency is positively associated with the quality of the parent–child relationship (van Ijzendoorn, Dijkstra, & Bus, 1995). This relation is probably bidirectional as harmonious relationships provide opportunity for children to develop verbal skills and better verbal skills help children make more harmonious social relationships (van Ijzendoorn et al., 1995). In consequence, adolescents' positive or negative relationship to parental authorities can serve as a model to foster or undermine their trust in other social authorities, including political authorities (Duke et al., 2009; Flanagan & Gallay, 1995; Gniewosz et al., 2009). Thus, we expected that adolescents who have poor relationships with their parents would report lower political trust.

However, the parent–child relationship is not affected solely by the child's cognitive ability; a more important factor is parental behaviors toward the child. If children perceive their parents as emotionally warm, supportive, and respectful of their dignity, they are likely to develop more positive relationships with them (Karavasilis, Doyle, & Markiewicz, 2003). Therefore, we expected that early adolescents who perceive more parental warmth would report closer ties to (or less alienation from) parents in middle adolescence, which can translate to greater political trust in late adolescence (Duke et al., 2009; Flanagan & Gallay, 1995; Gniewosz et al., 2009).

Finally, the association between early cognitive abilities and later political trust can be explained by factors other than school or family experiences. For example, Denny and Doyle (2008) found that 11-year-olds with more developed specific cognitive abilities, namely comprehension, become more interested in politics when they reach adulthood. This finding is not surprising because adolescents who lack specific cognitive skills might have difficulties following and understanding politics, which reduces their cognitive engagement in this area (Rindermann, Flores-Mendoza, & Woodley, 2012). At the same time, lacking or low cognitive engagement in politics can be associated with lower political trust (Catterberg & Moreno, 2006) as the individual would create only a shallow view on politics, which may be distorted in the negative direction (Meffert, Chung, Joiner, Waks, & Garst, 2006). Therefore, we expected that cognitive ability would have an indirect effect on political trust as mediated by individuals' cognitive engagement in politics.

Nevertheless, the association between cognitive abilities and political trust might also be spurious. For example, living in poor socioeconomic conditions (e.g., poverty, parental unemployment) adversely affects the development of children's verbal cognitive abilities (Sampson, Sharkey, & Raudenbush, 2008). At the same time, people coming from lower socioeconomic classes tend to have lower political trust because they do not feel that politicians and political institutions work for their benefit (e.g., Schoon et al., 2010). Consequently, it is possible that adolescents' cognitive abilities and political trust are both correlates of socioeconomic status of adolescents' families and do not have any mutual relation. Hence, we considered as necessary to rule out this alternative explanation in our analyses.

The present study

Having identified two characteristics of early adolescents that could be associated with political trust (cognitive ability and perceived parental warmth), our main research question was whether these two characteristics predict greater political trust in late adolescence. We differentiated between verbal and nonverbal cognitive abilities and expected that verbal ability would be more closely related to political trust. Next, we tested whether the effects of cognitive abilities and perceived parental warmth on political trust could be explained by more positive relations between schools and parents and by adolescents' greater cognitive political engagement. Parental education, understood as an indicator of family's socioeconomic status, was controlled for in all analyses.

A vast majority of studies investigating antecedents of political trust in adolescence come from Western and Northern Europe or from the United States. By contrast, our study was conducted in the Czech Republic, which is a Central European post-communist country. Generally, we assumed that basic socio-political conditions of adolescent development do not differ dramatically across these contexts, considering the fact that the Czech Republic has become a high-income economy and a member of the European Union in the past decade (see also Macek, Lacinová, & Poláškova, 2011; Macek & Marková, 2004). However, some contextually specific patterns still might be present. Most importantly, cross-national studies on adolescents' political trust suggest that young people from post-communist countries typically have rather distrustful views on political authorities and institutions

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