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## Trusting and controlling? Political trust, information and acceptance of surveillance policies: The case of Germany

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## ABSTRACT

Supporting surveillance policies is a risky proposition in the sense that people are uncertain about the consequences of these policies. We argue that political trust serves as a mechanism to reduce uncertainty in circumstances where civil liberties are in jeopardy. Building on different theoretical perspectives, we examined whether trust is more relevant to the acceptance of surveillance policies for citizens with high or low levels of information about those policies. Using survey data from a German research project on surveillance, we estimated the effects of political trust and policy-specific information on acceptance of surveillance. Whereas political trust fostered the acceptance of these policies, information about surveillance alone did not affect the acceptance of surveillance in any way. Estimating the interaction between political trust and policy-specific information showed that political trust was particularly important for surveillance policy evaluations of well-informed citizens. Thus, we did not find evidence that individuals compensated for informational constraints by relying on political trust.

### 1. Introduction

In recent years, several countries have passed legislation authorizing the conduct of surveillance as a reaction to fatal terrorist attacks. Examples are the Patriot Act in the US in 2001 and the new anti-terror laws passed in France in 2014. After the tragic terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015 and in Brussels and Berlin in 2016, not only secret services called for increased surveillance.

In a broad sense, surveillance can be understood as any one-sided systematic, routine monitoring of individuals or groups for a given purpose (Jenkins, 2014, p. 162; Lyon, 2014, p. 2; Monahan, 2011, p. 498). Surveillance policies are strategic measures by state authorities to gather information (see Marx, 2015 for a conceptual discussion). Today, they often imply the use of new technologies. Examples of surveillance policies include the introduction of biometric data into passports, the retention of telecommunications, or the gathering and evaluation of passengers' data. These policies are justified for the purpose of accomplishing the governmental goals of ensuring public order and safety for the people from crime, violence and other threats. However, even if surveillance measures appear justified from a societal perspective, such measures may limit individual civil rights “as the individuals do not have the possibility to control and regulate the access to their monitored personal information” (Taddicken, 2012, p. 257). To

study surveillance policies is particularly important at a time when big data allows for more intensive surveillance and when these policies are requested as a means to fight against terrorism. The findings of Edward Snowden and other reports on extended surveillance programs revealed the extent to which a government's methods of maintaining security might challenge individual liberties (Davis & Silver, 2004, p. 29).

Regarding the issue of legitimacy, the question of public approval of these policies is crucial, especially where individual civil rights are at stake. Against this backdrop it is surprising “that the views of citizens on government surveillance have not been thoroughly investigated” (Reddick, Chatfield, & Jaramillo, 2015, p. 129). Surveillance policies imply influence and control as well as personal vulnerability (Lyon, 2001). They pose uncertainty and risk as people may be confronted with restrictions on liberties. In these circumstances political trust as the expectation that political actors will not misuse their power (Gamson, 1968) may lead to a greater acceptance of these policies: trusting people “have faith in the authorities' ability to ensure that things do not get out of hand” (Davis, 2007, p. 69).

Some authors have examined this relationship (e.g., Davis & Silver, 2004), but we know little about the conditions in which political trust influences citizens' attitudes towards surveillance policy. With regard to different welfare state policies, it has been shown that individual conditions of sacrifice moderate the influence of political trust on the

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evaluation of policies (e.g., [Hetherington, 2006](#)). However, to the best of our knowledge, it has not yet been investigated how policy-relevant information conditions the influence of political trust on policy evaluations.

This study takes up the theme of trust and examines how political trust influences the acceptance of surveillance policies. It extends previous research in presenting results on the manner in which conditions of information or ignorance affect the consequences of political trust. The following research questions are at the core of this study: *Does political trust encourage the support of governmental surveillance measures? Does the influence of political trust on acceptance of surveillance measures depend on the level of information an individual holds about such surveillance?* Survey data from Germany were available for this study. It enables us to analyze these relationships in a country with relatively high levels of political trust and a particular history of surveillance among citizens who have lived in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR).

The approach of this article was taken for several reasons. First, it is particularly relevant to know how political trust shapes the acceptance of policies which imply a degree of uncertainty and ignorance. Uncertainties about the consequences of policies often occur and are not limited to government activities in the field of surveillance. Second, it is important to understand the consequences of the interaction between (dis-)trust and (mis-)information for policy acceptance as not only levels of trust but also sources (i.e., social media) and levels of citizens' information on political issues vary widely today. On the one hand, it is argued that low levels of trust make it more difficult for authorities to govern a society. On the other hand, distrusting citizens might be more effective controllers of governmental decisions and improve democratic government (e.g., [Marien & Hooghe, 2011](#), p. 268–269) as they are more critical of new policies. In both cases citizens' levels of information might affect the importance of trust for the support of policies. For instance, political trust might only be relevant if people are aware of the details of governmental decisions. Third, findings on the interaction of political trust and information improve our understanding of the concept of trust, for current theoretical discussions generally only question how uncertainty affects relationships of trust.

The article is organized as follows: [Sections 2 and 3](#) provide theoretical arguments and hypotheses on the consequences of political trust. [Section 4](#) presents an overview of the data and operationalization of the variables included in our analyses. After the presentation of the empirical results in [Section 5](#), the conclusion offers a discussion of our findings and suggests areas for future research.

## 2. Theoretical arguments on the consequences of political trust

Trusting people are confident that they will not suffer damage or may even achieve a positive return from a relationship of trust. The willingness to trust can be attributable to several impulses, which have been summarized by [Miształ \(1996, p. 21\)](#): “motivation to trust seems to be a result of either strong positive personal bonds or affects for the object of trust, or a result of our belief that we have ‘good rational reasons’ [...] to trust, or a result of our belief that trust enhances our interests or, more often, a result of a combination of all”.

Fundamentally, political trust connotes the expectation that political actors will not misuse their power, even if they are not being constantly scrutinized ([Gamson, 1968](#)). According to [Levi \(1997, p. 21\)](#), “the more trustworthy citizens perceive government to be, the more likely they are to contingently consent to its policies”. Thus, political trust is a resource to be used by the authorities to make and implement binding decisions. A reserve of support such as political trust helps governments to implement authoritative decisions even if not all demands are satisfied ([Easton, 1957](#), p. 385, 396). From the citizens' perspective, trust facilitates consent to governmental decisions, even if their consequences are perceived as risky or disadvantageous

([Gabriel & Trüdinger, 2011](#); [Tyler, 1998](#)).

Whereas many studies have been conducted on the factors giving rise to political trust, the implications of trust or distrust for policy attitudes have received less attention. A few studies point to the positive effects of political trust on compliance with tax laws or on support for law compliance (e.g., [Marien & Hooghe, 2011](#); [Scholz & Lubell, 1998](#)). Several authors focus on the influence of trust on attitudes towards welfare state policies. They stress the meaning of political trust for the support of governmental expenditure, of welfare state reforms, or of particular welfare state programs (e.g., [Gabriel & Trüdinger, 2011](#); [Hetherington, 2006](#); [Rudolph & Evans, 2005](#); [Svallfors, 2002](#)).

With respect to anti-terror policies in general or surveillance policies in particular, political trust may equally play a crucial role for various reasons. In general, it can be understood as a resource used to cope with situations of uncertainty ([Miształ, 1996](#), p. 18). Policies in different domains can create situations of uncertainty as citizens might face hitherto unknown binding decisions—even if the underlying processes, relevant actors and aims differ between policy domains such as welfare and surveillance. In this perspective, political trust can serve as a heuristic “when the policy or action involves uncertainty and risk because citizens are more reliant upon government assurances about the future” ([Rudolph & Popp, 2009](#), p. 336).

However, the uncertainties arising from surveillance policies differ from the kind of uncertainties created by policies in other domains such as welfare, and that might have an impact on the role of trust. For instance, while uncertainties arising from welfare state policies are often related to material losses or gains (e.g., higher or lower pension levels), uncertainties arising from surveillance policies can be described as follows: surveillance implies a potential for influence and control on the part of the actor exercising surveillance and vulnerability for those who are the target of the surveillance or for those who perceive the risk of being under surveillance ([Lyon, 2001](#)). Supporting surveillance policies is a risky proposition in the sense that people may be uncertain about their intended positive consequences (collective and personal safety) and potential negative implications (restrictions of liberties). In particular, political trust may be important if the policies in question jeopardize civil liberties: these liberties are intended to protect individuals from unwarranted governmental interference. As [Davis and Silver \(2004, p. 30\)](#) put it, “if the willingness to exchange civil liberties for security translates into a concession of power to government, then trust and confidence in government should take on great importance”.

When the consequences of political trust for the acceptance of surveillance policies are assessed, it is important to discuss the relevance of different objects of trust. While many authors focus on trust in a broad set of political institutions, we focus on trust in the legislative power, the judiciary, and the executive power for the following reason: trust in government seems to play a crucial role for the acceptance of surveillance as this state activity might be perceived as excessive governmental interference (see above). However, decisions by courts and the exercise of authority by the police shape domestic security policies such as surveillance. Thus, the police and the legal system are key institutions in assuring this field of state activity. These implementing institutions are expected to be impartial and to represent the rule of law (e.g., [Marien, 2011](#); [Rothstein & Stolle, 2008](#)). A violation of these expectations might have severe consequences for the acceptance of surveillance.

There have only been a few studies on the influence of political trust on anti-terrorism and surveillance policies. [Rykkja, Læg Reid, and Fimreite \(2011\)](#) analyzed the influence of social trust, trust in government, and political efficacy, on support for anti-terrorism measures but produced contradictory results. Whereas they found that high levels of social trust fostered skeptical attitudes towards the use of strong measures, they did not, in the multivariate model, find that trust in government had significant effects on such attitudes.

[Davis and Silver \(2004\)](#) showed that the more people trust in government and law enforcement, the greater their willingness to trade off

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