



Citation: Memoli, V. (2024). Citizens' perceptions of policy, policy measures and trust in political institutions after the first wave of COVID-19. *Quaderni dell'Osservatorio elettorale – Italian Journal of Electoral Studies* 87(1): 59-71. doi: 10.36253/qoe-14642

Received: April 28, 2023

Accepted: September 11, 2023

Published: September 19, 2023

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

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Citizens' perceptions of policy, policy measures and trust in political institutions after the first wave of COVID-19

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Abstract. Crises bring both human consequences and political repercussions. COVID-19, like any other crisis, strained both European governments and public support for them. During the first wave of the pandemic, political trust was correlated with public adherence to infection containment measures in the major democracies. At the end of the first wave, how did public perceptions of COVID-19 measures and of measures introduced by institutions to protect health and the economy affect the bond of political trust between the governed and the governors? Using Eurobarometer data, we estimate the effects on political trust of the public's assessment of institutional performance, political output and policy. Applying various multilevel regression models, we show that, at the end of the first wave of the pandemic, political trust was positively affected by institutional performance and only partially affected public perceptions and the policy measures taken by governments to contain the spread of the virus.

Keywords: Europe, political trust, COVID-19, health, economy, public opinion.

INTRODUCTION

Have the performance of public authorities and the health and economic measures implemented by governments – and public perceptions of the latter – strengthened political trust? We explore this dynamic in the context of COVID-19 by analysing public political trust after the first wave of 2020, when European governments facing the pandemic crisis sought to implement national and regional measures in a context of radical uncertainty. Even today, the adoption of differentiated territorial approaches, with priority given to protecting people's health (Sabat *et al.*, 2020) and the economy, does not seem to have had the desired effects.

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified debate on the appropriateness of measures adopted by public authorities (So *et al.*, 2020), and greater attention was given to trends in and the evolution of political trust. Research on political trust is typically framed by concerns about its decline (van der Meer, 2017). These fears, amid signs of crisis in various Western democra-

cies, have prompted academic interest in this specific issue because political trust is crucial for political systems and the health of democracy. Trust is a belief in the dependability of other people, organisations or processes; it helps reduce uncertainty in a complex world and facilitates social order and cohesion. Furthermore, it allows citizens to delegate decision-making and reduces the complexity of governing, making it one of the most vital assets of democracies (Marien & Hooghe, 2011). From this perspective, political trust is key in times of crisis since it supports the successful implementation of radical measures and facilitates governance.

Studies that have analysed political trust during the COVID-19 pandemic have shown that this trust is associated with the intensity of the pandemic (Scharff, 2021) and public compliance with measures aimed at flattening the infection curve (Bargain & Aminjonov, 2020). Despite strong public criticism of governments that limited freedom, lockdowns increased citizens' political trust, intention to vote for the party of the Prime Minister or President, and satisfaction with democracy (Bol, Giani, Blais & Loewen, 2021). During the pandemic, the sense of trust in institutions, according to some scholars, seemed to extend beyond the political space, also fuelling interpersonal trust in certain contexts (Easiasson, Sohlberg, Ghersetti & Johansson, 2021). For some scholars, the public tended during the pandemic to have greater trust in the institutions that managed the crisis, and this trust also tended to spill over to those not involved in such management (Baekgaard, Christensen, Madsen & Mikkelsen, 2020). Other studies found that emotions reduced the effect of trust in government but increased a propensity to accept restrictions on civil liberty among those who had little trust in government (Vasilopoulos, Mcavay, Brouard & Foucault, 2021). Like emotions, perceived threats to health and the economy also tended to shape trust in government, the former more than the latter (Kritzinger *et al.*, 2021). Compared to the European average, lower levels of perceived stress and concern over the coronavirus were found in Portugal, Poland and Bulgaria. In contrast, Sweden, the Netherlands, Finland, Denmark and Lithuania reported higher than average stress levels (Lieberoth *et al.*, 2021).

At the end of the first wave of the pandemic, were political institutions able to respond to the expressed needs of their citizens? To what extent did political choices increase public satisfaction by favouring the consolidation of political trust? Unlike previous studies, we try to answer to above questions by looking at all EU countries at the end of the first wave (July–August 2020) when, as confirmed by other scholars, the emotions and anxiety of the public relating to lockdowns probably had

less effect on their general assessment of institutional policies and performance. To that end, we adopt individual-level information related to citizens' assessment of institutional performance, their perception of government decisions during COVID-19, and institutional factors – such as institutional health and economic outputs – in addressing the spread of the pandemic. Following the institutional performance model, we claim that the public's evaluation of political performance, based on an assessment of institutional merit, is fundamental to political trust (Newton & Norris, 2000; Gustavsen, Asbjorn & Pierre, 2014). It is already known that citizens evaluate political performance as measured by the political success of institutions to implement policies and provide services that align with their own priorities. Where political actors and institutions achieve visible results, it is possible to predict that citizens will reward this positive performance with their confidence (Mishler & Rose, 2001). Conversely, we expect citizens to express low levels of institutional support, and consequentially to distrust political institutions, in the event of poor performance (Miller, 1974).

Thus, in terms of policies, decisions are more effective if public opinion believes that institutions are working on its behalf. However, we still lack a full understanding of what, according to public opinion, political institutions should have done and how appropriate it was to balance safeguarding public health with protecting the economy. On the one hand, restrictions on individual freedoms and productive activities made it possible to save lives. On the other, they resulted in substantial economic cost, at least in the short term. In contrast, less restrictive policies would have allowed a more rapid economic recovery but, at the same time, facilitated the transmission of the virus. The divergence between what individuals prefer and what maximises their well-being (Thaler, 2015) has undoubtedly made institutional decisions more difficult, and risks undermining the already tenuous relationship between governors and governed.

The pandemic crisis tested critical theories in the political trust literature. The main results of studies analysing the dynamics between political trust and COVID-19 reveal how political trust is influenced by timing (Altiparmakis *et al.*, 2021) – it increases in times of crisis and decreases, in some cases, immediately after the danger has abated, reaching previous average levels of political confidence (Kritzinger *et al.*, 2021). It follows different trends according to territorial contexts, beliefs, personal factors and exposure to COVID-19 (Devine, Gaskell, Jemmings & Stoke, 2021). Although the public appears to judge governments' actions by the spread of the virus rather than the type of policy adopted (Chen,

Lee, Dong & Taniguchi, 2021), the procedures adopted by public authorities have generally been well-received by their local populations (Sabat *et al.*, 2020). Although the link between institutional performance and public trust placed in these institutions seems intuitive, it could in the context of a pandemic be significantly affected by measures introduced to contain the pandemic itself. Therefore, shedding light on the dynamics between performance and policies after the first wave of COVID-19 is an appropriate test of the theoretical and empirical stability of the determinants of political trust and may, moreover, provide an institutional orientation compass for future political decisions.

This paper uses Eurobarometer data from July to August 2020 to analyse the effects on political trust of public satisfaction with the performance of public authorities, and public perceptions of policy, specifically, policy choices related to health and the economy. The information collected in this dataset refers to the end of the first wave of the pandemic when levels of political trust had likely changed, and the public's assessment of institutions was less conditioned by the crisis. The main results obtained using multilevel regression techniques confirm a correlation between institutional performance and political trust, corroborating previous findings that satisfied citizens are more likely to support their public institutions. At the same time, a weak convergence between (individual) demand and (institutional) supply in times of pandemic can generate public discontent and a sense of institutional distrust, especially when considering measures related to the economy.

The article is structured as follows. The next section presents the theoretical backbone of political trust, and we then present our hypotheses. Thereafter, we discuss the data and methods used in the article before presenting our results. Finally, the last section offers a conclusion.

POLITICAL TRUST

Political trust is a topic frequently investigated (Faulkner, Aaron & Kyle, 2015). It is defined as public confidence that the political system, its institutions or its actors will 'do what is right even in the absence of constant scrutiny' (Miller & Listhaug, 1990, pp. 358). Scholars agree in defining political trust as a reflection of the public's assessment of a given entity, such as a political party, government or parliament (Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017). Similar to an assessment of institutional performance, where 'A trusts B with regard to x' (Hardin, 2002, p. 26), political trust is presented as a synthesis of the gap between the public's perception of

how well political institutions should do and how well they are doing (Choi & Woo, 2016) and serves as a key psychological facilitator to governing effectively in times of uncertainty (Weinberg, 2020).

Paraphrasing Easton (1975), political trust is a form of support for the political system and its core values. It does not reflect agreement with specific policy decisions (Marien, 2011) but, rather, represents simultaneously the objects of both specific and diffuse support (Torcal & Montero, 2006; Bellucci & Memoli, 2012). By forming a connection between citizens and institutions, political trust promotes the legitimacy and effectiveness of democratic government (Braithwaite & Levi, 2003). It expresses the functioning of political institutions (Thomassen, Andeweg & Van Ham, 2017) as a consequence of institutional performance. From this perspective, political trust thus presents itself as 'a central indicator of public sentiment underlying [the] political system' (Newton & Norris, 2000, p. 53), crystallising the state of the social contract assumed between citizens and their government (Dalton, 2017).

Political trust encompasses both a political attitude and a state of mind; it is a perspective that influences how people think and act (Hosking, 2014). Indeed, political trust influences the stability and efficiency of the political system and enables certain political behaviours (Bauer & Fatke, 2014). It is based on an expectation that the trust object can produce positive results (Levi & Stoker, 2000) and, thus, tends to be high when policies are deemed effective or when the public perceives a congruence between its expectations and policy outcomes (Rudolph & Evans, 2005). From this perspective, it acts as a heuristic (Rudolph, 2017), allowing people to decide whether to support new government policies or initiatives. It also represents an implicit 'psychological-democratic contract of trust' in which individuals extend their trust when they feel they receive sufficient benefit – whether material or non-material – from the system (Wroe, 2014, p. 92). Even when policies only benefit some of the public, political trust helps others to overcome their scepticism and give the government the benefit of the doubt (Macdonald, 2020, p. 3).

During the first pandemic wave, with some European countries facing an acute crisis, public support for key institutions seems to have increased (Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2022), due to the 'rally round the flag' phenomenon (Baekgaard *et al.*, 2020; Schraff, 2021). This trend was more evident in some countries, at least during the first wave of the pandemic (Esaiasson *et al.*, 2021) when insecurity drove the public to rely more on government institutions (Kestilä-Kekkonen, Koivula & Tiihonen, 2022). In some countries, this effect was more subtle

(Bol, Giani, Blais & Loewen, 2021), while in others it weakened over time (Altiparmakis *et al.*, 2021) or was even wholly absent, as in France (Kritzinger *et al.*, 2021). In other words, levels of political trust were associated with the events of the survey period and were susceptible to variation depending on the events and the intensity with which these were felt by the public (Davies *et al.*, 2021). In this study, we looked at political trust in the period from July to August 2020, when the initial lockdowns had ended, the fears connected to the pandemic crisis had subsided, and citizens could probably evaluate with greater rationality and serenity the actions through which the first pandemic wave was addressed.

HYPOTHESIS

Political trust is vital in democracy. It is a prerequisite for guaranteeing the population's support for institutions (Easton, 1969) and is fundamental to maintaining the relationship between those governing and the governed (Devine, Gaskell, Jemmings & Stoke, 2021). Even in times of uncertainty, such as pandemic shocks, it continues to act as a glue, strengthening the relationship of the political class with the public (Weinberg, 2020). Schraff (2020), analysing the effects of the pandemic on political support, finds that the rise of COVID-19 infection rates increased political trust. Bangerter and colleagues (2012), studying the impact on political trust of the 2009 H1N1 epidemic in Switzerland, found that people displayed high levels of trust in the government during the early stages of the epidemic. Bol and colleagues (2021) found a similar trend when analysing fifteen EU countries: COVID-19-related lockdowns increased trust in government, at least in the short term. In contrast, Aksoy and colleagues (2020) found a negative impact of past exposure to epidemics on trust in government.

Although approaches to combating the coronavirus varied between countries, most citizens believed their government performed well in managing the outbreak (Pew Research Center, 2020) and appreciated its management of the pandemic (Goldfinch, Taplin & Gauld, 2021). A strong appreciation of institutional performance characterises countries such as Italy (Falcone *et al.*, 2020), where the pandemic crisis was particularly severe.

According to the reward–punishment approach, citizens tend to renew their trust in political institutions if the latter demonstrate positive performance. In this view, higher levels of satisfaction with the output of institutions or entities typically result in greater trust in them (Askvik, Jamil & Dhakal, 2011). Therefore, it is possible to hypothesise that at the end of the first COVID-19 wave:

H1: Political trust increases when citizens are satisfied with the measures taken to fight the coronavirus outbreak (H1).

The success or failure of policies and the resulting political trust levels also depend on the measures taken by governments. During the first pandemic wave, governments imposed curfews and restrictions on social interaction with varying degrees of coercion (Hale *et al.*, 2020). Even Western democracies did not hesitate to impose draconian measures that limited human rights and paralysed economies (Cohen & Kupferschmidt, 2020). Strict health guidelines may have been the driving force that increased levels of public trust in political institutions such as governments (Quinn, Kumar, Freimuth, Kidwell & Musa, 2013). The same can be said of the economic measures adopted by institutions, although in some of the OECD countries most affected by COVID-19, such as the US, the UK and Italy, lockdowns had a profound impact on people's well-being, affecting the division of labour within the family and the propensity for collaboration (Biroli *et al.*, 2020).

Even if health policies were a prerequisite for trust in government (Christensen & Laegreid, 2005), the attempt to balance containment policies with other factors related to the national economy fuelled heated public debate on the adequacy or otherwise of such measures (So, Tiwari, Chu, Tsang & Chan, 2020). In countries where governments prioritised health protection, a few controversies excepted, the majority of the population seems to have supported the adoption of such policies (Lesschaeve, Glaurdic & Mochtak, 2022), with levels of support varying between states and according to specific policy measures (Sabat *et al.*, 2020). Conversely, in countries where governments favoured economic policies to protect the national economy and livelihoods, high mortality levels (Pierre, 2020) generated widespread public discontent. In summary, public approval of more significant state intervention to tackle the pandemic does not seem to extend to measures to protect the economy (Manoo & Palusàková, 2021).

According to the output-oriented performance model of regime support (Hobolt, 2012), trust in institutions is related to how citizens rate government responses to COVID-19 (Altiparmakis *et al.*, 2021). Even if the public tends to be more concerned with results than the policies implemented by their governments (Chen, Lee, Dong & Taniguchic, 2021), when institutional policy choices match their perceptions, they will support their political institutions. Given that during the first pandemic wave the public was more inclined to support health measures than economic ones (Oana, Pellegata & Wang, 2021), it is possible to hypothesise that:

H2a: As the public policy perception and policy output related to health increase, the level of political trust grows;
 H2b: As the public policy perception and policy output related to the economy increase, the level of political trust declines.

METHODS, DEPENDENT AND INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

The hypotheses discussed in the previous section have been tested in 27 European countries using Eurobarometer survey data gathered between July and August 2020, focusing on three political institutions: parliament, national government and local government. Studies analysing political trust usually look primarily at the national government or parliament. Without taking a position in the debate on whether local or national government is more important, it is worth remembering that far more politicians are elected locally than nationally in all countries. Furthermore, during the pandemic, local government – the level of government closest to members of the public – was at the forefront of supporting national governments in the challenges faced in addressing lockdown-fuelled demands and the discontent of the public (Silva, 2022). In other words, a better empirical understanding of this phenomenon can be gained by including the local level in analyses of political trust. Thus, using a range of data concerning political trust in the three institutions mentioned above¹ and applying a polychoric principal component analysis, an index was obtained as a synthesis of analysed information (Table 1).²

Five main independent variables are used. The first expresses the public's general assessment of the choices made by the authorities to fight the coronavirus.³ The second and third are represented by two dummy variables that describe public perception at the end of the first pandemic wave of the measures taken by the authorities to that point.⁴ The last two are represented by additive

indices expressing government responses in terms of economic and health policies designed to fight COVID-19. The first index records two economic measures – income support and debt/contract relief – while the second summarises five health measures: public information campaigns, testing policy, contact tracing, facial coverings and protection of the elderly.⁵ This information enabled us to test the above hypotheses and assess how political choices regarding coronavirus, personal perceptions, and measures related to health and the economy affected political trust. The hypotheses were tested while controlling through the socio-demographic variables commonly used in the literature – gender, age and education (Lesscheeve, Glaurdic & Mochtak, 2021) and the political aspects related to political trust – trust in others (Bargsted, Oritz, Cáceres & Somma, 2022), ideology (Borbàth, Hunger, Hutter & Oana, 2022) and political efficacy (Adman & Strombland, 2011). Finally, we also consider the different countries, aggregating them by geographical area,⁶ and the Gini index, because high levels of income inequality leave countries (Gozgor, 2022) and populations particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 (Finch & Hernandez Finch, 2020).

Political trust is a complex phenomenon influenced by numerous factors that tend to strengthen or weaken the nexus connecting rulers and citizens. While a decline in political trust may affect some political entities more than others, it is worth remembering that 'abrupt drops in political trust can be rapidly restored'

follows: 'these measures focus too much on health to the detriment of the economy' (recorded as 1); 'these measures focus too much on the economy to the detriment of health' (recorded as 2), and 'a balance has been reached' (recorded as 0). The 'don't know' responses were not considered in the analysis. To differentiate between the needs expressed by the public, we transformed the responses into two dichotomous variables. The first, reflecting a greater intervention on health, was recoded as follows: 0 'these measures focus too much on health to the detriment of the economy + a balance has been reached' or 1 'these measures focus too much on the economy to the detriment of health'. The second, which reflects a greater intervention on the economy, was as follows: 0 'these measures focus too much on the economy to the detriment of health + a balance has been reached' or 1 'these measures focus too much on health to the detriment of the economy'.

⁵ We use the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (see <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/research-projects/covid-19-government-response-tracker>), which provides a cross-sectional and cross-temporal measure through ordinal variables. Since the interviews collected in Eurobarometer 93.1 (2020) were collected from 10 July 2020, the information relating to the two indices covers the period from 1 January 2020 to 9 July 2020. The economic policy index ranges from 0.797 to 1.824, while the health policy index ranges from 0.579 to 1.298.

⁶ The 27 European countries have been aggregated into three geographical areas: *North and West* (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Sweden), *South* (Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain), *East* (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia).

¹ The question was 'I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain institutions. For each of the following institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or not trust it.' The answers included 'tend not to trust' (recorded as 0) and 'tend to trust' (recorded as 1). The 'don't know' responses were not considered in the analysis.

² The political trust index obtained (factor scores) ranges from 0 (absence of political trust) to 1.114 (maximum level of political trust).

³ The question was as follows: 'In general, how satisfied are you with the measures taken to fight the Coronavirus outbreak by... – The public authorities in our community?' The variable was recoded as follows: 0 'not at all satisfied'; 1 'rather dissatisfied'; 2 'fairly satisfied' and 3 'very satisfied'. The 'don't know' responses were not considered in the analysis.

⁴ The question was as follows: 'Thinking about the measures taken by the public authorities in (OUR COUNTRY) to fight the coronavirus and its effects, would you say that...?' The responses were coded as

Table 1. Factor analysis.

	Political Trust
Regional and local public authorities	0.793
Government	0.940
National Parliament	0.944
Kaiser – Meyer – Olkin test	0.618
Barlett's Test (Sig.)	0.000
Eigenvalue	2.403
Cronbach's Alpha	0.748

Source: Eurobarometer 93.1 (2020).

(Zmerli & Van der Meer, 2017, p. 2) and much depends on the periods and countries considered.

Looking at the political trust between 2018 and 2020 (Fig. 1), we see that citizens' support for public institutions is above the European average in fewer than half the countries considered. With the advent of the pandemic, political trust increased significantly in some countries, especially those where the crisis was at its most intense. In contrast, in other countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, France, Luxembourg and Slovenia), it tended to decrease, probably because other factors also contributed to undermine the trust network between the public and its institutions.

At the end of the first lockdown, public levels of political trust divided Europe. While the pandemic cri-

sis affected all EU member countries equally, its effects show an asymmetrical trend from north to south, amplifying the long-standing fragilities and weaknesses of the latter. The north–south contrast is very pronounced and is most likely affected by institutional management of the pandemic crisis.

In northern Europe we see strong public support for political institutions. For example, in Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden, citizens trust at least two out of the three institutions. Conversely, except for Malta and Portugal, where political trust is higher than the EU average, the most significant discontent is found in southern Europe, especially in Croatia, Bulgaria and Italy, where more than 53% of respondents do not trust any institution. This result is undoubtedly worrying if we consider that political trust has never been exceptionally high in Italy, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have created more significant problems. This result appears to underline the intuitions of Almond and Verba (1963), for whom Italy, even then, was characterised by a political culture of low trust.

Table 2 summarises the variables employed in the analysis by providing descriptive statistics.

ANALYSIS

Before proceeding with our analysis, it is crucial to recognise that our dataset is hierarchically organised, with

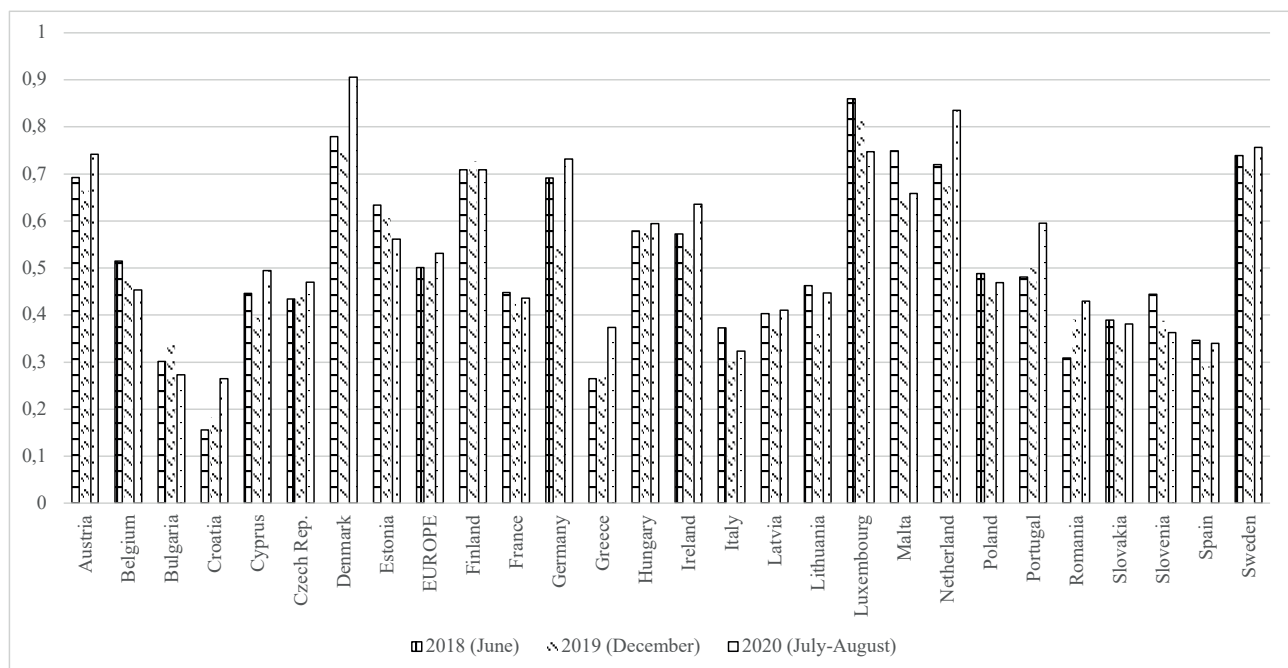


Figure 1. Political trust (factor scores). Source: Eurobarometer 91.5 (2018), 92.3 (2019), 93.1 (2020).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistic.

	Observations	Mean / %	St. dev.	Min	Max
<i>Political trust</i>	21,310	0.546	0.453	0	1.114
<i>Lef-right scale</i>	21,310	5.360	2.081	1	10
<i>Age</i>	21,310	51.233	17.456	15	99
<i>Health measures</i>	21,310	1.171	0.245	0.797	1.824
<i>Economic measures</i>	21,310	0.976	0.204	0.579	1.298
<i>Gini index</i>	21,310	31.014	3.845	24.63	41.28
<i>Satisfaction with Public Authorities</i>					
not at all satisfied	1,984	9.3			
rather not satisfied	4,243	19.9			
fairly satisfied	9,383	44.0			
very satisfied	5,700	26.8			
<i>Political efficacy</i>					
totally disagree	3,025	14.2			
tend to disagree	5,106	24.0			
tend to agree	8,297	38.9			
totally agree	4,882	22.9			
<i>Citizens' perception of health measures</i>					
balance-more economy	16,791	78.8			
more health	4,519	21.2			
<i>Citizens' perception of economic measures</i>					
balance-more health	13,871	65.1			
more economy	7,439	34.9			
<i>Education</i>					
no full-time education	233	1.1			
still studying	1,204	5.7			
14-15 years	2,360	11.1			
16-19 years	8,942	42.0			
20 years and older	8,571	40.2			
<i>Social trust</i>					
do not to trust at all	730	3.4			
tend not to trust	4,425	20.8			
tend to trust	14,450	67.8			
totally trust	1,705	8.0			
<i>Gender</i>					
man	9,935	46.6			
woman	11,375	53.4			
<i>Geographic area</i>					
North and West (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherland, Sweden)	8,303	39.0			
South (Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain)	3,940	18.5			
East (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia)	9,067	42.5			

Source: Eurobarometer 93.1 (2020).

one level (respondents) embedded within another. Ignoring the multilevel character of the data could affect the validity of our estimations (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002; Steenbergen & Jones, 2002) by overstating their precision. To address these methodological concerns, we use a mul-

tilevel model that allows each observation to be correlated within countries. In this way, we include a random intercept at the country level in the analysis to capture national differences in the respondents' propensity to trust in political institutions that are not identified by the model's

systematic (fixed) variables. This is the most appropriate method to consider both individual and national effects. What role does the public perception of institutional performance, health and economic policies play in explaining political trust? Table 3 reports the models we have estimated to answer this question. Model 1, a theoretical model – the so-called null model (Rabe-Hesketh & Skrondal, 2008) – does not include Level-1 or Level-2 predictors and thus allows us to distinguish between individual and national levels in the total variance in our dependent variable. In this way, we can estimate the so-called intra-class correlation, ρ , a measure that tells us how much of the total variation in the political trust index can be explained solely by differences between national-election surveys. We find that approximately 16.4% of the difference in political trust can be explained simply by the fact that the respondents come from different countries. These results confirm the suitability of using multilevel analysis.

As expected, as levels of satisfaction with the measures taken by the authorities increase, public trust in political institutions also increases (Model 2). At the end of the first wave of the pandemic, institutional efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19 appeared to be well-received by the public, supporting the notion that when institutions function well, they generate trust (Mishler & Rose, 2001) and consequently enjoy public support.

It is also true that levels of public trust increase when institutions meet the needs and requirements of the public. At the end of the first pandemic wave, the combined effect of public perception and political output – defined based on health and economic measures – only partially strengthened public trust in institutions. Political trust increases as health policy output increases among those who would like greater investment in health care ($b=0.068$; Model 3). Conversely, an inverse relationship is found when looking at the level of convergence between individual perceptions and measures relating to the economy ($b=-0.058$; Model 4). These results support the notion that the public, alarmed by the spread of the pandemic, tends to support its government's choices, even backing rigorous measures to protect public health (Oana, Pellegata & Wang, 2021) to the detriment of the economy. Thus, those political institutions that addressed the pandemic crisis by investing more in the health sector have been rewarded by public trust.

In Model 5, all the previously analysed independent variables were reported. The levels of convergence between political outputs and individual preferences, while representing a litmus test for political institutions, reveal that public perception is affected by context and situation. At the end of the first wave of the pandemic, political distrust tended to decrease, thanks to pub-

lic intervention in the health sector (Fig. 2), and the choices made by this sector, however rigorous and even questionable, appear to have been well-received by the public. More significant criticism from the public is evident, however, if we examine individual perceptions and measures relating to the economy (Fig. 3). Worsening living and economic conditions during the pandemic, probably in part a consequence of previous national economic policies, dragged even those who had previously enjoyed relative economic stability into poverty and deprivation. In all likelihood, the pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities and created new ones, to which public institutions were only able to respond minimally during the crisis. Indeed, in areas where inequalities are more evident, the sense of distrust towards political institutions is greater (Fig. 4). This is the case in several eastern European (Bulgaria, Romania, Latvia, Lithuania) and southern European countries (Spain, Portugal, Greece, Italy), where job-seekers and those with low or medium levels of education were more likely to experience a fall in income during the pandemic. In other words, it is in Southern and Eastern Europe that the sense of distrust is most evident. However, support for institutions tends to increase with age. This is particularly true for those who display higher trust, understand and are able to influence the political processes and, ultimately, have a right-wing ideological disposition.

At the end of the first wave, the decisions made by political institutions, especially in the health sector, were applauded by the public. The empirical findings appear to suggest that the degree of convergence between individual preferences and political results does not always guarantee institutional support, especially in times of crisis.

There are many reasons why some countries may have been hit harder than others. As our data demonstrate, differences in government policy responses explain some variation. However, these results should be treated with caution because they capture a first pandemic scenario, the evolution of which is linked to numerous factors that lie beyond the scope of this work. Future studies could investigate more deeply the connection between public need and political results – especially in those contexts in which crises have affected the stability of political regimes and the state of health of democracies (see Hellmeier *et al.*, 2021) – to shed light on how citizens help to support democratic consolidation.

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 has strained the trusted networks that connect the governed with those that govern. Following the

Table 3. Political Trust.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5					
<i>Satisfaction with Public Authorities</i> (not at all satisfied)										
rather not satisfied		0.066****	0.010	0.067****	0.010	0.064****	0.010	0.064****	0.010	
fairly satisfied		0.282****	0.010	0.275****	0.010	0.277****	0.010	0.261****	0.010	
very satisfied		0.381****	0.011	0.371****	0.011	0.372****	0.011	0.348****	0.011	
<i>Citizens' perception of Health measures</i> (balance and more economy)										
Health measures			-0.132****	0.031				-0.161****	0.031	
Citizens' perception of Health measures *Health measures			-0.108*	0.063				0.110*	0.064	
Citizens' perception of Economic measures (balance and more health)						0.011	0.028	-0.013	0.028	
Economic measures						-0.003	0.074	0.007	0.069	
Citizens' perception of Economic measures *Economic measures						-0.058**	0.027	-0.067**	0.027	
<i>Social trust (do not to trust at all)</i>										
tend not to trust		0.024*	0.014	0.024*	0.014	0.023	0.014	0.023	0.014	
tend to trust		0.178****	0.014	0.176****	0.014	0.178****	0.014	0.172****	0.014	
totally trust		0.270****	0.017	0.267****	0.017	0.269****	0.017	0.263****	0.016	
<i>Political efficacy (totally disagree)</i>										
tend to disagree		0.034****	0.008	0.034****	0.008	0.033****	0.008	0.033****	0.008	
tend to agree		0.204****	0.008	0.202****	0.008	0.203****	0.008	0.198****	0.008	
totally agree		0.272****	0.010	0.270****	0.010	0.270****	0.010	0.267****	0.010	
Gender (man)		0.007	0.005	0.007	0.005	0.007	0.005	0.008	0.005	
<i>Education (no full-time education)</i>										
still studying		0.046*	0.026	0.045*	0.026	0.041	0.026	0.037	0.026	
14-15 years		-0.009	0.025	-0.011	0.025	-0.011	0.025	-0.015	0.025	
16-19 years		-0.031	0.024	-0.033	0.024	-0.034	0.024	-0.039	0.024	
20 years and older		-0.004	0.024	-0.007	0.024	-0.007	0.023	0.014	0.024	
Age		0.001****	0.000	0.001****	0.000	0.001****	0.000	0.001****	0.000	
Left-to-right ideological placement		0.008****	0.001	0.008****	0.001	0.009****	0.001	0.008****	0.001	
Gini index		0.079	0.051	0.101**	0.048	0.073	0.051	0.093*	0.049	
Gini index* Gini index		-0.001	0.001	-0.002**	0.001	-0.001	0.001	-0.002*	0.001	
<i>Geographic area (North and West)</i>										
South		-0.111**	0.040	-0.148****	0.042	-0.104**	0.042	-0.136**	0.043	
East		-0.138****	0.036	-0.131****	0.033	-0.134****	0.037	-0.125****	0.034	
Costant	0.547****	0.035	-1.226	0.809	-1.677**	0.782	-1.093	0.825	-1.499*	0.798
Variance at Level 1	0.034	0.009	0.005	0.002	0.005	0.001	0.006	0.002	0.005	0.001
Variance at Level 2	0.171	0.002	0.126	0.001	0.126	0.001	0.126	0.001	0.125	0.001
N (Level 1)	21,310		21,310		21,310		21,310		21,310	
N (Level 2)	27		27		27		27		27	

Note: *p<0.10, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01, ****p<0.001.

Source: Eurobarometer 93.1 (2020).

onset of the new coronavirus epidemic and its rapid spread, a state of emergency was declared in most countries. The first measures put in place were, on the whole, aimed at preventing and stemming the expansion of the contagion. Despite the difficulties associated with imposing multiple

measures related to health, the economy and other public needs, the public remained satisfied with its institutions and, in return, offered its support in the form of trust.

Analysing the level of political trust at the end of the first wave of the pandemic, we find a divided Europe.

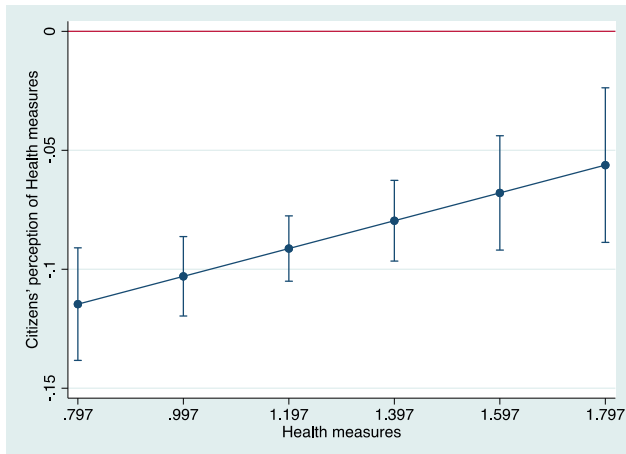


Figure 2. Marginal effect of Citizens' perception of Health measures on Health measures (with 95 % confidence interval).

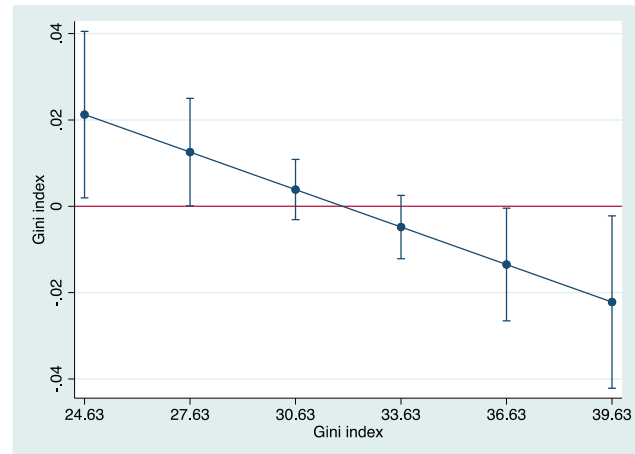


Figure 4. Marginal effect of Gini index on Gini index (with 90 % confidence interval).

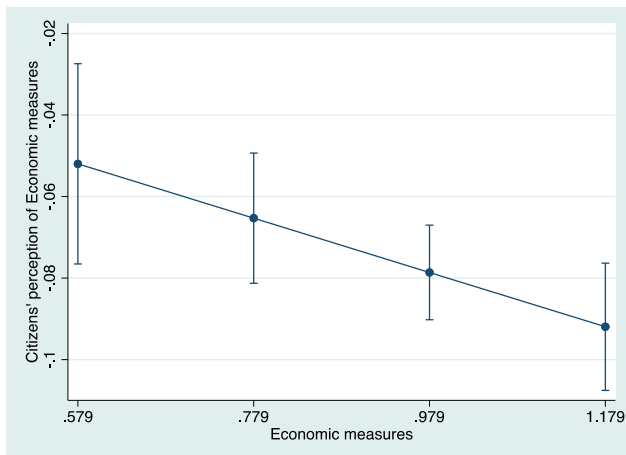


Figure 3. Marginal effect of Citizens' perception of Economic measures on Economic measures (with 95 % confidence interval).

Although the crisis affected all EU member countries equally, the effects reveal asymmetrical outcomes, amplifying the fragility of southern Europe. In the south, the health risks linked to the coronavirus are most evident and levels of political trust have never been stable. Here, the institutional choices and relative measures adopted to contain the spread of the virus appear to have been rewarded only partially in terms of political trust.

The adoption of various health and economic measures has only partially strengthened citizens' trust in institutions. The primary need to contain and counter the risks deriving from the spread of COVID-19, and the need to preserve economic activity (or some means of subsistence) were loudly approved in public opinion. Institutional efforts to meet the public's demands have

significantly impacted trust levels. Measures relating to health are particularly well-received by the public, as confirmed by a decreasing sense of mistrust among those who requested them. In contrast, public reactions to the economic measures implemented by public institutions reveal an evident dissatisfaction and, consequently, a worsening of the fiduciary relationship.

Our article proposes two more general contributions. First, political trust is strongly linked to institutional performance. When institutions work for their citizens, satisfying their needs and requests, the public appreciates their efforts and supports its representatives by offering them political trust. Despite considerable uncertainty around the social impacts of COVID-19, political institutions have been able to address complex ethical issues and make political compromises where necessary, the nature of which have varied according to country and political context. Secondly, the measures taken by public authorities sacrifice neither health nor the economy for the sake of the other. Faced with an entirely new and unexpected pandemic crisis, the countries that managed to protect the health of their populations generally sought also to protect their economies (Hasell, 2020). However, interventions in the economic sphere, unlike those related to health, seem not to have met public expectations and have negatively affected political trust.

The data in our possession has some limitations. The information used in this work, collected by the Eurobarometer, is limited to 2020 only. In this sense, it was impossible to analyse the changes that characterised European public opinion after the first wave from a longitudinal perspective, as other scholars have done in a more limited number of countries. To understand the impact of COVID-19 recovery policies, we should also

include measures focused on their perceived sustainability and identify satisfaction levels relating to policy outcomes and related processes. These aspects suggest that future researchers should build data panels able to broaden the academic debate and help political institutions better interpret public requests. Public consensus may thus grow despite the fact that strategies and measures introduced to counter the spread of the pandemic in some countries were questioned and criticised.

FUNDING

This research has been conducted with the contribution of the University of Catania 'PIAno di inCentivi per la RICerca di Ateneo 2020/2022'.

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