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Not just mirror images: how political trust and distrust relate to public service experiences

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ABSTRACT

Political trust and distrust are increasingly recognized as distinct judgements of political institutions, rather than opposite ends of a single continuum. While poor performance of and unfair processes in public services are assumed to fuel distrust, most research infers distrust from low trust. We address this gap by using measures designed to capture both political trust and distrust. Specifically, we examine whether outcome and procedural dissatisfaction relate to political distrust in the same way they relate to trust. Using a two-stage design, we analyze a cross-sectional survey of service users across eight European countries and a pre-registered vignette experiment that manipulates information about public service experiences. Cross-sectional evidence shows that positive outcome and process experiences are linked to higher political trust, and that their combined absence marks the lowest trust. In contrast, only process experiences are associated with political distrust. Experimentally, evidence indicates primarily that exposure to both negative outcome and process experience information decreases trust and increases distrust, though distrust does differ more across process than outcome manipulations. Overall, we conclude that satisfactory service outcomes primarily align with political trust, while fair and respectful processes are more tied to political distrust, though experimental evidence is more mixed.

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KEYWORDS Political trust; political distrust; public service perceptions; performance evaluations; procedural experiences

Introduction

European citizens encounter public services effectively daily (Kumlin, 2004). As put by Rothstein (1991, pp. 43–44), ‘citizens’ lives, to a greater degree

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than before, are directly dependent on public sector programs and schemes. We are born, we play, we are educated, we are nursed [...] and we finally die under the aegis of public administration'. These interactions – from visiting general practitioners to seeking income support from social services – provide information about how political authority is exercised, thereby shaping citizens' support of political institutions (Kumlin & Haugsgjerd, 2017; Kumlin & Stadelmann-Steffen, 2014).

Perceived shortcomings of public service delivery foster feelings of neglect, disillusionment, and alienation, thereby damaging citizens' trust in political institutions (De Blok *et al.*, 2020; De Blok & Kumlin, 2022; Haugsgjerd & Kumlin, 2020; Kumlin, 2004; Tyler, 2000). Concerning as that may be, empirical studies assessing these relationships fail to differentiate a lack of trust from active distrust towards political institutions. Despite evidence that political trust and distrust judgements are distinct, both conceptually and empirically (Bertsou, 2019b; Devine *et al.*, 2024; Jennings *et al.*, 2021; Seyd, 2024; Van De Walle & Six, 2014), researchers continue to treat low trust and distrust interchangeably. Accordingly, whether negative experiences with public services heighten political distrust, rather than simply reducing trust, remains unaddressed.

In that regard, the first contribution of this paper is a test of this conceptual distinction, by treating trust and distrust as distinct but interrelated concepts. Herein, political trust is understood as the strength of a belief in positive expectations of political institutions acting benevolently and beneficially for society, whereas distrust reflects the strength of belief in negative expectations of misconduct, risk, and harm (Devine *et al.*, 2024; Hardin, 2004; Jennings *et al.*, 2021; Luhmann, 1979; Van De Walle & Six, 2014). While outcome satisfaction and procedural fairness are established predictors of political trust (De Blok & Kumlin, 2022; Grimes, 2017; Haugsgjerd & Kumlin, 2020; Tyler, 2006; Van Ryzin, 2015), it remains unclear whether they also relate to political distrust. This matters both academically and societally.

Academically, theories of trust emphasize competence, responsiveness and integrity, whereas accounts of distrust stress unequal treatment and violations of procedural norms (Bertsou, 2019a; Steenvoorden *et al.*, 2009; Winsvold *et al.*, 2024). Hence, theories of trust might, or might not, be useful to understanding distrust. This has societal relevance, as distrust is linked to non-compliance, resentment, and support for disruptive political action (Bertsou, 2019b; Gulliver *et al.*, 2023; Jennings *et al.*, 2021). Without knowing how useful theories of trust are for understanding distrust, efforts to address distrust risk using incorrect logic. Hence, while we are agnostic about the possibility of distinct causes, this study contributes to societally relevant research by testing whether explanations of political trust apply to political distrust.

Our second contribution is hence theoretical. We examine whether established explanations of political trust also apply to political distrust by studying process and outcome experiences with public services. This positions public services as a relevant setting for studying political (dis)trust, as such experiences inform judgements about how political institutions shape society in beneficial and harmful ways (Kumlin, 2004). The specific focus on process and outcome experiences builds on claims that procedural violations are more consequential for distrust (Bertsou, 2026). This suggests that outcome-based explanations may overstate their relevance for distrust if they overlook procedural expectations. At the same time, scholars have argued that individuals may tolerate unfavorable outcomes if they believe that procedures are fair, or tolerate unfair processes when outcomes are satisfactory (De Blok & Kumlin, 2022; Esaiasson *et al.*, 2019; Thibaut & Walker, 1975; Tyler, 2000). We hence contribute by highlighting how public service outcomes and processes relate to trust and distrust in similar and different ways.

Our third contribution is empirical. We approach this question through two complementary studies. First, we analyze survey data focusing on citizens' cumulative public service encounters and their political trust and distrust across eight European countries. Second, the survey included a pre-registered vignette experiment that manipulated information about municipal co-residents' service process and outcome experiences.¹ Although this shifts the focus to short-term information about the service experiences of others, it similarly provides evidence on whether process and outcome experiences affect trust and distrust in similar ways. Together, the two studies provide complementary insights into how (information about) outcome and process experiences with public services relate to political trust and distrust.

Cross-sectional results confirm that outcome satisfaction is associated with higher political trust. Moreover, in line with past findings, citizens with poor procedural experiences who are also dissatisfied with service outcomes report particularly low trust. In contrast, political distrust is associated with procedural experiences, but not directly nor conditionally with outcome satisfaction when procedural experiences are accounted for. However, the experimental results provide weaker support for this. Primarily exposure to both negative process and outcome experiences altered general evaluations of services, trust, and distrust. Yet, comparisons between treatments suggest that procedural experiences significantly altered distrust while outcome satisfaction did not, while both significantly altered trust. In all, our findings suggest that improving service outcomes is less relevant to distrust when the processes through which they are delivered are negatively experienced (Thibaut & Walker, 1975; Tyler, 2000). At the same time, for citizens to have trust, the outcome side cannot be discounted.

Theory and hypotheses

Political trust and distrust

Political trust is conceptualized as a relational evaluation between citizens and political actors as well as political institutions, with citizens expecting certain actions and outcomes from them (A trusts B to do X in context C, Hardin, 2002). Such expectations are not without uncertainty, hence requiring citizens to engage in retrospective examinations of political performance to determine evaluations. This is known as the ‘trust-as-evaluation’ approach (Ouattara *et al.*, 2023; van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017). Hence, political trust refers to the expectations of citizens grounded in their subjective evaluations of political institutions.

Empirically, this is measured by asking explicitly how much they trust political institutions. While capturing broad perceptions, this provides a rather blunt instrument. Notably, this conflates the absence of trust with the presence of distrust, and vice versa, thereby oversimplifying what citizens may expect from politics. Accordingly, researchers argued for a differentiated framework that treats trust and distrust as distinct but related (Bertsou, 2019b; Devine *et al.*, 2024; Lewicki *et al.*, 1998; Van De Walle & Six, 2014). This clarifies that citizens evaluate political institutions through mixtures of (absent) positive and negative expectations, with some combinations reflecting optimism, mistrust, alienation, or cynicism.

In trust research, it is implicit that theories are oriented towards the ‘positive end’, focusing on expectations that political institutions will act, for example, in a competent, fair, and beneficial manner (Hamm *et al.*, 2019; Valgarðsson *et al.*, 2024). Narrowly defined then, trust captures how much citizens hold positive expectations (Bertsou, 2019b; Van De Walle & Six, 2014). Importantly, not all citizens hold well-formed or strong positive expectations. As such, political trust ranges from a strong positive confidence in institutions, to a more hesitant or conditional stance, to a belief that political institutions are unable to benefit society. When making this implicit aspect explicit, a lack of trust is more reflective of lacking hope that political institutions will be advantageous (Hamm *et al.*, 2019; Hardin, 2002; Lewicki *et al.*, 1998).

When defining political distrust as something distinct, it refers to how much citizens hold expectations of risk, harm, and exploitation stemming from the actions of political institutions (Bertsou, 2019b; Hardin, 2004). While the absence of trust may reflect disillusionment, distrust reflects the presence of negative expectations, such as anticipating unfair treatment, deception, or even abuse of power. As Bertsou (2019b, p. 224) illustrates, ‘being told you should expect [...] to be punched forcefully puts one in a very different state than if you are told you will [...] not receive a pat on the back’.

Distrust can be grounded in lived experiences and be entirely rational, as demonstrated by marginalized communities that faced neglect, historical repression, or systemic exploitation (Krishnamurthy, 2015; Lenard, 2008). In the context of needing support from public services, the absence of help or denial of entitlements can increase distrust when this is interpreted as an injustice and power abuse (Theiss *et al.*, 2025), particularly when it is expected that the state protects its citizens from certain declines in their standard of living (Kumlin & Stadelmann-Steffen, 2014). Such experiences can make people prone to believing grander conspiracies claiming that political institutions are secretly working together to harmful ends (van Prooijen *et al.*, 2022). More concerningly, distrust also heightens the willingness to support violent collective action to address the perceived threat (Gulliver *et al.*, 2023). Accordingly, distrust would not simply mirror trust, but reflect a distinct logic. Likely, most citizens fall somewhere between no and total distrust, as they recognize that political institutions will not be randomly harmful, but also that institutions that can pose threats under certain conditions.

While this distinction has gained traction, it remains unknown whether theories explaining differences in political trust can be used to understand political distrust. To address this gap, we turn to the literature on the determinants of political trust.

Outcome satisfaction

The trust-as-evaluation approach proposes that trust in political institutions increases when citizens are satisfied with their performance (Easton, 1965; van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017). Empirically, this has received robust evidence, supporting a relationship between performance and political trust (Citrin & Stoker, 2018). Relatedly, scholars have argued that dissatisfaction with the performance of political institutions cultivates distrust (De Blok *et al.*, 2020; De Blok & Kumlin, 2022; Haugsgjerd & Kumlin, 2020). While poor performance might engender distrust, the relationship may not be merely the inverse of trust. However, given the lack of empirical research into distinct causes, there is limited basis to speculate that this does not apply to distrust.

Research into the trust-as-evaluation approach typically examines two types of evaluations. The first strand is rooted in macro-level performance linked to policy outcomes. This line of research connects *outcomes* to trust through notions of self-interest and economic reasoning, viewing citizens as taxpayers assessing state services and as (electoral) judges evaluating whether outcomes justify their costs (Kumlin, 2004). From this perspective, 'citizen[s] will attempt to maximize [their] gain from the political system, just as a person would do in a financial market transaction' (Lind & Tyler, 1988, pp. 151–152).

Beyond a calculated self-interest perspective, and particularly given the depth of government services and programs, citizens can also be concerned about norms of equity (Tyler, 2000). Complementary research examines the effects of welfare retrenchment on political trust, often in combination with economic malperformance (Kumlin, 2011; Kumlin & Haugsgjerd, 2017; Kumlin & Stadelmann-Steffen, 2014). These findings suggest that economic crises and declining social protections undermine political trust beyond directly affected groups. In all, policy outcomes likely shape the expectations that citizens hold of their political institutions.

The significance of policy outcomes has been further corroborated at the micro-level, where citizens' own interactions with public services shapes their political trust (De Blok *et al.*, 2020; Van Der Meer & Dekker, 2011). Research focusing on public services highlights that personal experiences, just as macro-level policy outcomes, constitute 'a site of adult political learning' (Kumlin, 2004; Soss, 1999, p. 364). In contrast to macro-economic performance, it is difficult to evaluate social policies in a straightforward manner, given heterogeneity in institutions and a lack of consensus on performance indicators (Kumlin, 2004). Thereby, personal encounters with street-level bureaucrats – from police officers and judges to social service bureaucrats and health care workers – provide citizens valuable insights into the standards upheld for public programs and services by their political system (Rothstein & Stolle, 2008; Stals *et al.*, 2025; Van De Walle & Bouckaert, 2003; Van Sluis & Van De Walle, 2015). Citizens thus rely on these personal experiences to form broader expectations about the functioning of the public services, and by extension, political institutions.

Consequently, whether macro-level trends or direct personal experiences, citizens rely on information about policy outcomes when determining their political trust. Following this first strand of literature, we focus on outcome (dis)satisfaction, referring to citizens' subjective evaluations of the results delivered by public services they or their close family have used (Kumlin *et al.*, 2024). Accordingly, we hypothesize that *dissatisfactory public service outcomes relate to lower political trust (H1a)*. If causes are similar, then we expect that bad performance also increases distrust. While this has been hypothesized (De Blok *et al.*, 2020; De Blok & Kumlin, 2022; Haugsgjerd & Kumlin, 2020), it has not been tested on its own right as something distinct from trust. Hence, we adopt the hypothesis that *dissatisfactory public service outcomes relate to higher political distrust (H1b)*.

Procedural fairness

The second strand of research focuses on the *process* of how outcomes are reached, with procedural fairness as its central component. This perspective mainly originates from a curiosity in people's willingness to accept outcomes

that were fairly decided upon, irrespective of the outcome itself (Thibaut & Walker, 1975; Tyler, 2000). These explanations ‘go beyond discontent with particular decisions or outcomes to tap into more deep-rooted perceptions about how democracy works’ (Norris, 2011, p. 188). This encompasses several elements, including processes that offer citizens opportunities to provide input in decision-making (Thibaut & Walker, 1975), the degree of impartiality or neutrality in policy implementation (Tyler & Huo, 2002), and perceptions of respect (Lind & Tyler, 1988). At the macro level, this research has identified corruption, accountability, and responsiveness as critical determinants of political trust (Van Der Meer & Dekker, 2011; van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017).

At the micro-level, citizens also assess their personal encounters with public services and programs based on their subjective expectations as to what constitutes a fair process (Kumlin, 2004). These assessments in turn shape perceptions of the quality of government (Grimes, 2017; Van De Walle & Bouckaert, 2003; van den Bos, 2005). Procedural fairness theory suggests that people care about voice, impartiality and respect (Lind & Tyler, 1988). Empirically, research has linked personal perceptions of fair treatment by public officials with political trust (Soss, 1999; Werner & Marien, 2022), a phenomenon known as the fair process effect (van den Bos, 2005). In interactions with public programs and services, several factors shape citizens’ perceptions of fair treatment, such as accessibility, transparency, efficiency, respectful, and attentive behavior by street-level bureaucrats (Kumlin, 2004; Rothstein, 2009). Whether formal processes or informal interactions, these procedural elements offer citizens deeper cues for whether authorities exercise power impartially, share common norms, and treat individuals with dignity (Grimes, 2017; Lind & Tyler, 1988).

In sum, citizens also rely on information about processes when determining their political trust (Grimes, 2017; Norris, 2011; Werner & Marien, 2022). Following this second strand of literature, process experiences refer to citizens’ broader subjective experiences with how services are delivered, including perceptions of fairness, transparency, and efficiency. Accordingly, we hypothesize that *negative experiences with public service processes relates to lower political trust (H2a)*. Moreover, we also adopt the hypothesis that *negative experiences with public service processes relates to higher levels of political distrust (H2b)*.

Unsatisfactory outcomes and unfair processes

Existing theories posit an asymmetry in the impact of government performance, with poor performance having a disproportionately strong impact (Huseby, 1999; Slovic, 1993). This is connected to the negativity bias in public opinion, where individuals tend to give greater weight to negative

information when forming evaluations (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). A strong negativity bias is likely to be most pronounced when citizens are confronted with multiple sources of dissatisfaction that reinforce each other. Specifically, an unfair process and dissatisfactory outcome are likely to strengthen each other, resulting in particularly low political trust levels (De Blok & Kumlin, 2022; Esaiasson *et al.*, 2019; van den Bos, 2005). Similarly, Kern *et al.* (2024) demonstrate that accumulated policy losses increase frustration and reduce perceptions of democratic legitimacy, even when arising through procedurally democratic means. Hamm *et al.* (2023) further argue that when multiple failures occur, citizens are more likely to interpret them as signs of systemic betrayal or intentional harm. This suggests that a combination of unfair processes and dissatisfactory outcomes might be especially toxic.

By this logic, there would also be a compensating interaction. When outcomes are negative, perceived procedural fairness becomes more important, so that citizens remain content if the outcomes were arrived at fairly (Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996; De Blok & Kumlin, 2022). In reverse, citizens can accept outcomes reached without fair processes if it is favorable to their self-interest or norms of equitable outcomes (Esaiasson *et al.*, 2019). It follows then, that the dual negativity of dissatisfactory outcomes and unfair processes, rather than either element on its own, is most consequential in deteriorating trust. Accordingly, we hypothesize that *negative experiences with public service processes and outcomes interact*. Specifically, an unfair process and dissatisfactory outcome are expected to reinforce each other and reduce trust, while a positive evaluation on one dimension can compensate for a poor evaluation on the other (H3a). We also hypothesize a similar effect for distrust (H3b).

Exploratory hypotheses and tentative expectations for distrust

So far, we have outlined the hypotheses for political trust based on the literature and have set up mirroring hypotheses for political distrust, given the limited basis available to argue that theories of trust would not apply. It is, however, important to discuss the limited work that examines the reasons people themselves give for distrusting their political institutions (Bertsou, 2019a; Steenvoorden *et al.*, 2009; Winsvold *et al.*, 2024; also see Devine *et al.*, 2024).

When probing why people have absolutely no trust in politicians, Steenvoorden and colleagues (2009) show that Dutch citizens justify their stance by pointing to a perceived lack of decisiveness, broken promises, and insufficient awareness of issues citizens deem important. Making a sharper distinction between trust and distrust, Bertsou (2019a) finds that distrust emerges amongst citizens in Italy, Greece and the UK when they view political

actors as self-serving, deceitful and harmful. This stands in contrast to those with low trust, who do not depict their political system as fundamentally corrupt or personally threatening. More recently, based on the analysis of open-ended survey answers, Winsvold and colleagues (2024) show that Norwegians ground political trust in perceived predictability and competence. For political distrust, other causes are mentioned, such as procedural concerns, including self-serving motives, breaches of moral and transparency norms, and failures to honor promises.

While these works are qualitative, making it difficult to cleanly disentangle process and outcome factors, a recurring pattern is that people more readily invoke procedural considerations to explain their distrust. From this, it stands to reason that procedural fairness is more central to political distrust than outcome satisfaction. This would bring new light to discussions on the importance of procedural fairness to dispel distrust and highlight the overemphasized influence of outcome satisfaction. Yet, as we are the first to disentangle these relationships, we have limited grounds to fully develop an argument, and can only speculate. Accordingly, we explore whether theories of political trust do or do not apply to distrust.

Data and methods

To test our hypotheses, we rely on complementary studies: a cross-sectional survey (Study 1) and a vignette experiment (Study 2). The survey captures associations based on recalled personal public service encounters, establishing how experiences with processes and outcomes relate to political trust and distrust. However, given its cross-sectional nature, this cannot establish the direction of these associations. The experiment addresses this by manipulating information about process and outcome experiences of municipal public services of co-residents. This necessarily shifts focus from cumulative experiences shaping political (dis)trust judgements, to short-term information about (indirect) personal experiences of others altering judgements. Hence, the two studies are not replications, but complementarily test the same theoretical distinction. Together, the studies show how outcome and process experiences with public services relate to political trust and distrust.

For both studies, we rely on a cross-national survey that covers eight European countries² in 2024. The field work was conducted by Bilendi, a survey company which hosts online non-probability samples. Sample quotas were set to ensure representativeness for gender, age, and education of the national adult populations. In total, 12,123 respondents participated in the survey. See Appendix A.1 for more details. Together, the two studies combine the generalizability of observational data with the internal validity of experimental evidence.

Study 1

Dependent variables

Political trust and distrust are measured using questions designed to capture trust and distrust as distinct yet interrelated concepts. We build on the method developed by Devine *et al.* (2024) and Jennings *et al.* (2021), who demonstrate that political trust and distrust can be measured as empirically distinct attitudes.

Respondents evaluated a battery of eight statements presented in random order on a 5-point Likert scale (1: strongly disagree; to 5: strongly agree), designed to capture both positive and negative expectations toward core political actors, i.e., government, political parties, and politicians. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for the various items. The trust items assess whether citizens believe that these actors act competently, honestly, and in the public interest. The distrust items tap negative expectations, such as the belief that political actors are deceitful or act primarily in their own interests.

Importantly, although presented as a single battery, factor analyses consistently distinguish a trust and distrust factor. Hence, in line with Devine *et al.* (2024) and Jennings *et al.* (2021), the trust and distrust items cannot be reduced to a single construct (see Appendix B.1). For analyses, we use sum-scores of trust (Cronbach’s alpha: 0.88) and distrust (0.70).

Independent variables

To measure outcome satisfaction, we first construct a composite measure. This measure is based on responses to a battery of items asking respondents how (dis)satisfied they were with the public service(s) they, or their closest family, had used on a scale from 1 (extremely dissatisfied) to 5 (extremely satisfied). This included services such as general practitioners, public

Table 1. Trust and distrust questions.

	Mean (S.D.)
Trust (sum-score)	2.756 (0.881)
I can count on the government to serve the public interest	2.817 (1.079)
Political parties typically have good intentions	2.887 (1.040)
Most politicians are honest and competent	2.646 (1.081)
The government understands the needs of my community	2.634 (1.076)
The government usually does the right thing	2.794 (1.047)
Distrust (sum-score)	3.589 (0.855)
As a rule, the government is ineffective and deceitful	3.279 (1.102)
Political parties typically ignore people like me	3.645 (1.054)
Most politicians put their own interest before the country’s interest	3.841 (1.065)

Note: Respondents were asked ‘To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following?’ on a 5-point Likert scale.

schools, and social housing. Per respondent, the row mean across valid responses was computed (Cronbach's alpha: 0.90), creating individual-level scores capturing average (dis)satisfaction with public service(s) used. The mean outcome satisfaction level is 3.59 (S.D. = 0.96), suggesting respondents were relatively satisfied on average.³

Next, we create a composite score reflecting respondents' procedural experiences. This captures respondents' perceptions of how they were treated and how public service processes functioned during their interactions. Our measure is based on a battery of 12 items asking respondents to reflect on their service experiences overall, and indicate their (dis)agreement with statements about their interactions. These statements tap into, for example, whether it was easy to access the service(s), whether the respondent felt listened to, whether they experienced discrimination, or whether they were able to influence how the service was delivered (Cronbach's alpha: 0.84).⁴ The average level of agreement with the statements is 3.59 (S.D. = 0.63), suggesting that most people experienced service processes positively.

In the analyses, we also include several control variables to account for sociodemographic (gender, age, education, subjective household income, and place of residence, place of birth), and political (left-right ideology and interest) characteristics. We further account for country differences by including country-fixed effects (See Appendix A.2 for variable details).

Analytical approach

We examine the cross-sectional relationship between service process and outcome evaluations, on the one hand, and political trust and distrust, on the other hand, by estimating OLS regression models. Models are run with process and outcome evaluations to test the first two sets of hypotheses. To test hypotheses 3, we include an interaction term between the process and outcome evaluation.

Cross-sectional results

Table 2 shows the regression results testing hypotheses 1 and 2. Starting with the effects of outcome satisfaction on political trust, models 1 and 2 show, in line with existing research, that citizens who are more satisfied with their public service outcomes also have significantly higher political trust. Moreover, those who experienced the process of using public services positively also have significantly higher trust. These estimates remain robust after including controls. Accordingly, hypotheses 1a and 2a, using cross-sectional data, are accepted.

Table 2. Association of public service evaluations with political trust and distrust.

	(1) Trust	(2) Trust	(3) Distrust	(4) Distrust
Satisfaction outcome	0.595*** (0.045)	0.568*** (0.043)	-0.082 (0.044)	-0.085 (0.043)
Satisfaction process	0.789*** (0.068)	0.611*** (0.066)	-0.992*** (0.067)	-0.798*** (0.067)
Political orientation		-0.053 (0.033)		0.345*** (0.033)
Political interest		0.427*** (0.030)		-0.221*** (0.031)
Female (ref: male)		-0.021 (0.017)		-0.044** (0.017)
Age		-0.303*** (0.040)		0.135*** (0.040)
Highly educated		0.053** (0.018)		-0.072*** (0.018)
Urban-Rural		-0.127*** (0.020)		0.043* (0.020)
Income		0.573*** (0.033)		-0.431*** (0.033)
Born in country		-0.079** (0.028)		0.130*** (0.029)
Country (Ref: Belgium)				
France		0.058 (0.033)		-0.049 (0.034)
Germany		-0.143*** (0.033)		-0.152*** (0.034)
Ireland		0.386*** (0.034)		-0.297*** (0.034)
Italy		-0.038 (0.034)		-0.071* (0.035)
Poland		0.063 (0.034)		-0.073* (0.035)
Portugal		0.135*** (0.034)		-0.178*** (0.034)
Switzerland		0.370*** (0.033)		-0.436*** (0.034)
Intercept	1.888*** (0.037)	1.622*** (0.060)	4.277*** (0.036)	4.341*** (0.062)
R ²	0.074	0.185	0.039	0.110

Note: N = 9545. Continuous predictors are standardized between 0–1. Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Moving to political distrust, models 3 and 4 in Table 2 show somewhat of a distinct pattern. Citizens who experienced the processes of public services positively have significantly lower political distrust, thereby mirroring its effect on political trust. The estimate for this association is also of a slightly larger magnitude than observed for political trust.

However, citizens who were more (dis)satisfied with their public service outcomes do not have significantly different levels of distrust. Importantly, this weaker association is not driven by lower variation in political distrust (Table 1), implying that the absent effect does not result from restricted variability. This finding hence indicates that outcome satisfaction is not

significantly associated with political distrust when procedural public service experiences are accounted for. It is also worth noting that the models perform better for trust than distrust overall. While 18.5 per cent of the variation in trust is explained, they account for only 11 per cent of the political distrust variation. This could indicate that political distrust is less aligned with public service performance than political trust, though it may also suggest distrust is more rigid. Nonetheless, using cross-sectional data, hypothesis 1b (outcome satisfaction relates to distrust) is rejected, while hypothesis 2b (procedural satisfaction relates to distrust) is accepted.

Next, we assess whether outcome satisfaction and procedural fairness interact. Table 3 shows regression models that estimate the interaction, while Figures 1 and 2 plot the predicted values for political trust and distrust respectively. For political trust, we find that citizens with negative process *and* outcome experiences tend to express the lowest political trust. In contrast, those who were dissatisfied with public service outcomes, but experienced the process as positive, still expressed high levels of trust, suggesting poor outcomes are linked less to low trust when processes are positive. In reverse, people with poor process experiences still expressed higher trust if they were satisfied with service outcomes, indicating poor processes relate less to trust when outcomes are satisfactory. In other words, a compensating effect between procedural and outcome (dis)satisfaction is found for political trust, confirming hypothesis 3a.

In contrast, we do not find a similar compensating effect for political distrust. Rather, as Figure 2 shows, distrust differs between respondents based on their procedural experiences with public services, regardless of their outcome (dis)satisfaction. This implies that political distrust varies with procedural experiences, irrespective of outcome satisfaction, hence rejecting hypothesis 3b. Together, cross-sectional evidence indicates that outcomes and processes are jointly associated with political

Table 3. Interaction of public service evaluations with political trust and distrust.

	(1) Trust	(2) Distrust
Satisfaction outcome	1.510*** (0.126)	-0.226 (0.128)
Satisfaction process	1.540*** (0.134)	-0.937*** (0.137)
Satisfaction outcome X Satisfaction process	-1.511*** (0.189)	0.226 (0.193)
Controls	Yes	Yes
Intercept	1.082*** (0.091)	4.422*** (0.093)
R ²	0.191	0.110

Note: N = 9545. Continuous predictors are standardized between 0–1. Standard errors in parentheses.
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

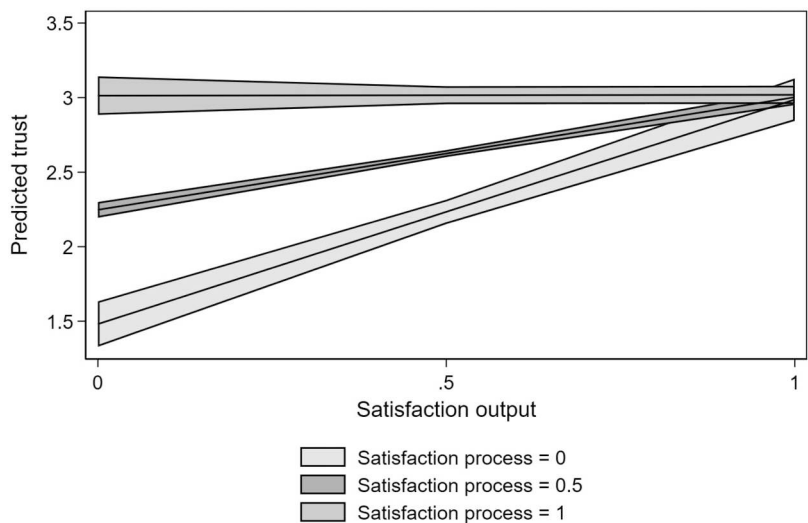


Figure 1. Predicted political trust by service outcome and process evaluations. Note: Plots the predicted level of political trust by reported process and outcome evaluation of having used public service(s) as based on model 1 from Table 3.

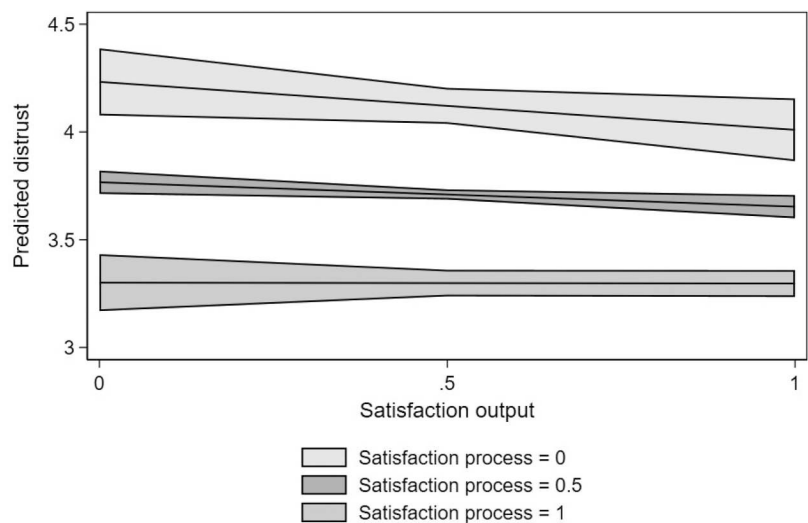


Figure 2. Predicted political distrust by service outcome and process evaluations. Note: Plots the predicted level of political trust by reported process and outcome evaluation of having used public service(s) as based on model 2 from Table 3.

trust, while distrust is mainly related with public service process experiences. Accordingly, there seem to be limits to using theories of political trust to understand distrust.

Robustness tests

To assess the robustness of these findings, we first replicated the analyses reported in [Tables 2](#) and [3](#) separately for each country (Appendix C). These country-specific models largely confirm the main conclusions, although coefficients do not reach conventional levels of statistical significance in all cases.

Second, we estimated item-level robustness checks for the cross-sectional study, replacing the composite trust and distrust measures with the individual survey items from which they are constructed (Appendix C). Across the trust items, the results are substantively identical to those obtained using the composite measure. Across the distrust items, procedural experiences remain consistently and more strongly associated with distrust. Outcome dissatisfaction is statistically significant for only one item (the government is ineffective and deceitful), and no interaction effects emerge. Together, these analyses support the overarching conclusion that distrust is primarily related to procedural experiences, although outcome (dis)satisfaction is not entirely irrelevant.

Study 2

The experiment

While the cross-sectional analyses are grounded in individuals' real-life experiences with public services, they do not allow for causal inference. To address this limitation, the cross-sectional results are complemented with insights from a survey vignette experiment that manipulates information about the quality of municipal public service outcomes and processes.⁵ Our approach builds on experimental work that manipulates service elements, which often emphasize institutional or policy-level factors (Esaïasson *et al.*, 2019; Grimmelikhuijsen *et al.*, 2013; Werner & Marien, 2022). However, less experimental attention is given to how concrete and common interactions with services shape political trust. The few studies that do examine more common service interactions and political trust typically study process and outcome experiences separately (Tyler, 2006; Van Ryzin, 2015).

Overall, research shows that political trust is relatively difficult to temporarily shift, and tends to be highly stable (Devine & Valgarðsson, 2024). This creates tempered expectations regarding experimental treatment strength. From this perspective, the cross-sectional findings likely capture more cumulative experience-based evaluations, whereas experimental findings capture short-term updates that would marginally shift relatively stable trust judgements.

Our experiment manipulates process and outcome experiences of fellow citizens within a local government setting. Practically, a between-subjects

design was employed, including a control group and four (2×2) treatment groups. All participants were first presented with a brief description of a local government initiative to digitalize its services, and their interest in understanding citizens' broader political support for service digitalization. We opted for the digitalization of municipal public services for vignettes, as this was a generalizable example across the 8 countries included in the survey (De Smedt, 2025; Townley & Koop, 2024).

Afterwards, all participants in the treatment group were randomly assigned to a positive/negative outcome condition, and a positive/negative process condition. Specifically, 700 respondents from each country sample were to be randomly assigned to one of the 5 experimental conditions. Per country, about 100 were randomly assigned to the control group, with the remaining 600 split over the 2×2 conditions. In total, 816 respondents were assigned to the control group, while 1176, 1194, 1282, and 1197 respondents were assigned to the four treatment groups respectively.

For both the outcome and process treatment, respondents were shown an anonymized resident testimonial (labeled Resident Y and Resident Z), ostensibly drawn from a municipal citizen survey. This set-up follows similar studies on understanding the link between public service experiences and political trust, where respondents are presented with the experiences of similar others based on process and outcome factors (Fledderus, 2015). In this case, this is the experience of fellow municipal residents regarding digitalizing public services, and the municipality's interest in understanding citizens' support for further implementing the digitalization initiative. Figure 3 shows an example of one vignette.

Testimonials varied systematically along two dimensions: (1) (dis)satisfaction with the processes involved in using the digital platform (e.g., experience of navigating online platforms and of interactions with the online chat service), and (2) (dis)satisfaction with the outcomes of the service (e.g., satisfaction with the digital platform and utility of digitalizing services). In other words, the first dimension manipulates procedural experiences, while the second dimension manipulates outcome (dis)satisfaction. Testimonials were

Reactie 1:

Ik steun het digitale platform tot nu toe. Het was gemakkelijk om online toegang te krijgen, mijn aanvragen in te vullen, en ik kan alle beslissingen die genomen zijn terugvinden op de website. De chatservice op de website reageerde snel op mijn vragen, en de medewerkers van de chatservice waren behulpzaam en vriendelijk toen ik om informatie vroeg over mijn situatie.

Anonieme bewoner Y.

Reactie 2:

Mijn ervaring met het digitale platform is positief. Ik mis het niet om fysiek te moeten zoeken naar een vergunning of andere documenten die ik ontvang. Doordat alle documenten digitaal beschikbaar zijn, zijn ze makkelijker te vinden en de service is functioneler. Bovendien kan ik gewoon thuisblijven om dingen uit te zoeken zonder naar een kantoor te hoeven gaan voor hulp.

Anonieme inwoner Z.

Figure 3. Example experimental survey vignette. Note: Example shown for Flemish sample of a positive process and outcome experience condition.

either positive or negative, yielding four combinations. The control group read two snippets signaling ambivalence about the procedural and outcome experiences. After the treatment, participants were asked to share their own views on the digitalization initiative (see Appendix A.3 for operationalizations).

Dependent variables and analytical approach

After exposure to the treatments, we first asked respondents how they would evaluate the digital changes to the public services, ranging from 1 (negative) to 5 (positive). This allows us to assess whether respondents indeed changed their evaluations in line with the treatments. Afterwards, respondents were asked two questions from the original trust and distrust questions, adapted to the municipality context of the experiment. Given the embedded survey design and the novelty of adapting trust/distrust items to the municipality context, one item per construct was used to retain the central trust-distrust distinction: ‘The local council generally makes the right decisions’ (trust) and ‘The local council is not acting out of its residents’ best interest’ (distrust). These concise vignette-specific items similarly allow us to probe for (changed to) generalized positive and negative expectations toward political institutions (Devine *et al.*, 2024; Jennings *et al.*, 2021). Respondents could response to these statements on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

To assess the impact of treatments, predicted average values per treatment conditions are reported to give insight into general differences across experimental conditions. Afterwards, OLS linear regression models are run for political trust and distrust where the combined different treatment outcomes are included. As other political trust research using survey experiments shows, the expected effect of our treatment is likely small given difficulty in substantially changing trust judgements (e.g. Devine, 2025; Faulkner *et al.*, 2015; Grimmelhuijsen *et al.*, 2013; Peyton, 2020). To still detect small effect sizes, the analysis relies on the pooled sample to maintain statistical power.⁶

Experimental results

Figure 4 shows the mean scores for service evaluations, trust, and distrust across the outcome and process experimental conditions. The points represent predicted group means, and the connecting lines visualize differences between the control, negative, and positive conditions for the process and outcome manipulations respectively. Horizontal brackets indicate pairwise comparisons between conditions based on Bonferroni-adjusted post hoc tests following one-way ANOVA models.

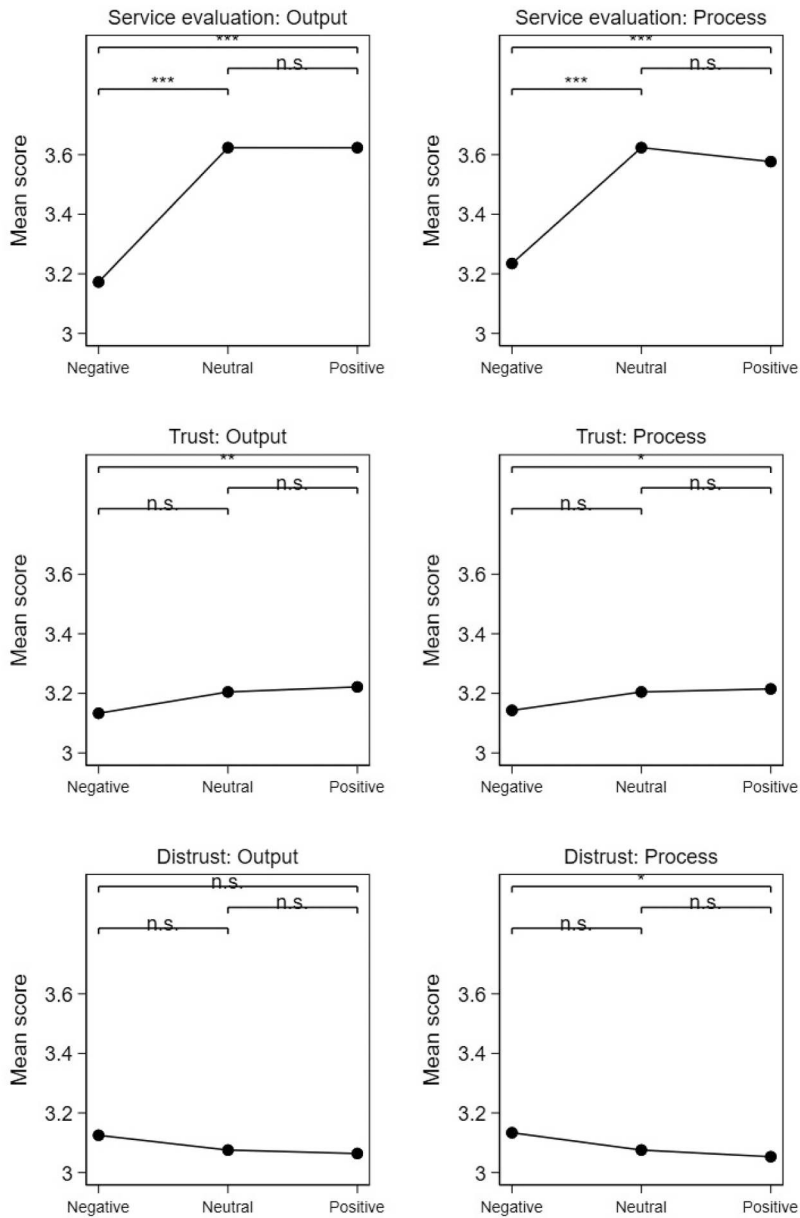


Figure 4. Means with Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise tests of service evaluations, trust and distrust by treatment conditions * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Note: N.S. is not significant.

Overall, differences between the control and positive treatments are limited, while the negative treatments consistently lower evaluations. This suggests that negative service information is more influential than favorable information.

Particularly, for the outcome (dis)satisfaction manipulations, negative information significantly lowers service evaluations relative to both the neutral and positive conditions. Negative outcome information also reduces political trust compared to positive information, although the difference between negative and control conditions is not significant. Political distrust, however, seems unaffected by outcome information, with no pairwise comparisons reaching statistical significance. Hence, public service outcome dissatisfaction reduces trust, but does not translate into greater distrust, aligning with the findings of study 1.

For the process experience manipulations, negative procedural information significantly lowers service evaluations compared to both the neutral and positive treatments. Moreover, political trust also differs between the negative and positive conditions. Critically, and contrasting the comparisons for outcome (dis)satisfaction manipulations, distrust differs only in response to negative processes: the contrast between negative and positive conditions is significant, while all other comparisons remain non-significant. These results mirror study 1, wherein trust relates to both outcomes and processes, while distrust is primarily related to procedural experiences.

Next, we move to the OLS regression analysis. Table 4 shows these results. Starting with the general evaluation of the municipality's service digitalization initiative, the analyses indicate that there are significant differences between the control group and each of the experimental conditions. The largest differences are observed for the double negative condition

Table 4. Results for combined effect of treatments on evaluation, trust, and distrust.

	(1) Evaluation	(2) Trust	(3) Distrust
Reference: neutral control group			
Negative outcome and negative process	−0.697*** (0.051)	−0.147*** (0.044)	0.112* (0.047)
Negative outcome and positive process	−0.216*** (0.051)	−0.017 (0.044)	0.008 (0.047)
Positive outcome and negative process	−0.109* (0.050)	0.009 (0.043)	0.015 (0.046)
Positive outcome and positive process	0.112* (0.051)	0.010 (0.044)	−0.025 (0.047)
Intercept	3.631*** (0.039)	3.210*** (0.034)	3.065*** (0.036)
<i>N</i>	5331	5331	5331
<i>R</i> ²	0.064	0.004	0.002

Note: Unstandardized regression coefficients reported; Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

(−0.697), followed by the negative outcome and positive process condition (−0.216), and lastly the positive outcome and negative process conditions (−0.109). Moreover, respondents in the double positive condition had significantly more positive evaluations (0.112). Hence, results suggest that the experimental manipulations operated as intended.

While the results for general evaluations follow our expectations, this does not extend to trust and distrust. Despite the differences between conditions shown in [Figure 4](#), only the double-negative condition produces significantly lower trust, as well as higher distrust, with other conditions not being significantly different. Consequently, hypotheses 1 and 2 regarding isolated outcome and process effects are not supported by these regression models. The results do provide some support for hypothesis 3 on the interaction between outcome and procedural (dis)satisfaction, though this support is weak at best, and mainly points at a negativity bias. As the R^2 's also show, the experimental conditions explain very little variation for trust and distrust: around less than half a percent in the variation is explained. This indicates that the experiment had little to no impact on how much trust and distrust respondents reported.

Robustness tests

To examine the robustness of the experimental findings, multiple additional tests were conducted. As a first check, the OLS regressions were replicated using country-specific subsamples to see if results were driven by single national contexts (D.1). The results mirror the results in [Figure 3](#), though at a lower significance level as would be expected by the power reduction. Yet, a robust estimate is found for the double negative condition, with the other treatment effects rarely having a significant effect on trust or distrust.

A second robustness check included only the highest-quality respondents, namely those who did not complete the survey relatively hastily (defined as spending less than 25 per cent of the average time to complete the survey) and who passed the manipulation check (Appendix D.2).⁷ Also in this restricted sample, we find that the double-negative condition exerts the strongest negative effect on service evaluations and trust, consistent with a negativity bias. However, it does not significantly increase distrust.

A third robustness test included covariates for the dependent variables to isolate effects of experimental exposure (Appendix D.3). Controlling for personal service experiences, prior trust and distrust, and relevant sociodemographic and political factors, the patterns remain unchanged. The double negative treatment lowers service evaluations, decreases trust, and increases distrust, while the other treatment combinations do not show consistently significant effects.

Discussion

European citizens interact with public services on a daily basis, and these experiences inform how they view political authorities (Kumlin, 2004; Kumlin & Haugsgjerd, 2017; Kumlin & Stadelmann-Steffen, 2014; Soss, 1999). When services perform poorly or procedures are perceived as unfair, people may feel neglected or alienated, thereby fueling political distrust (De Blok *et al.*, 2020; De Blok & Kumlin, 2022; Haugsgjerd & Kumlin, 2020). Yet, much of this research measures distrust as the absence of trust. Recent work warns that this is misleading, as low trust does not necessarily imply distrust (Devine *et al.*, 2024; Jennings *et al.*, 2021). Low trust reflects limited positive expectations, whereas distrust involves active negative expectations of misconduct or harm (Bertsou, 2019b, 2019a). Taking this distinction seriously raises a core question: do unsatisfactory outcomes or unfair service procedures actually foster political distrust, rather than simply reduce trust (De Blok & Kumlin, 2022; Grimes, 2017; Kumlin & Haugsgjerd, 2017)?

In this study, we address this question by examining whether experiences with public services, both in terms of processes and outcomes, relate to political distrust in the same way they relate to trust. Previous research has shown that outcome satisfaction and procedural fairness improve political trust (De Blok *et al.*, 2020; De Blok & Kumlin, 2022; Haugsgjerd & Kumlin, 2020; Tyler, 2000). To assess whether similar relationships apply to political distrust, two complementary empirical studies – a cross-sectional and experimental analysis – were conducted using recent innovations in political distrust research (Devine *et al.*, 2024; Jennings *et al.*, 2021). In doing so, we provide one of the first empirical contributions into potentially distinct explanations of political trust and distrust.

The results confirm that procedural and outcome satisfaction relate to higher political trust (De Blok & Kumlin, 2022; Haugsgjerd & Kumlin, 2020; Kumlin & Haugsgjerd, 2017; Van De Walle & Bouckaert, 2003). Moreover, results indicate that it is particularly a dissatisfactory outcome and an unfair process that relates to lower trust (De Blok & Kumlin, 2022; Esaiasson *et al.*, 2019). Yet, our findings indicate that this is not mirrored for political distrust. As the cross-sectional analyses show, mainly public service process experiences relate to political distrust. This suggests that theories of trust do not readily apply to distrust. However, experimental results provide weaker support. The experiment shows that the double negative condition of a poor outcome and process experience was primarily impactful. Yet, pairwise comparisons between experimental treatments show that distrust only significantly differs between process conditions and not outcome conditions, while trust differs across both. In all, these findings indicate that both service processes and outcomes matter for political trust, while processes seem to matter more for political distrust than outcomes.

The apparent difference between political trust and distrust in how process and outcome experiences matter carries implications for assessing public service reforms. Our study lends further credence to the literature treating political trust and political distrust as distinct orientations (Bertsou, 2019b, 2019a; Lewicki *et al.*, 1998; Van De Walle & Six, 2014). The evidence indicates that theories of political trust only partially account for variation in political distrust. Specifically, the findings align well with works examining the justifications people give for having political distrust (Bertsou, 2019a; Devine *et al.*, 2024; Steenvoorden *et al.*, 2009; Winsvold *et al.*, 2024). Here, citizens frequently highlight ethical and normative expectations for reasons to distrust their representatives. This suggests that procedural expectations carry more weight than outcome performance when forming distrust judgements.

In a broader sense, explanations that ‘tap into more deep-rooted perceptions about how democracy works’ (Norris, 2011, p. 188) appear central to distrust. This aligns with discussions of political distrust among marginalized communities that is rooted in institutional neglect and exploitation (Krishnamurthy, 2015; Lenard, 2008). Citizens’ judgments of political distrust are likely shaped by how public programs and services function (Kumlin, 2004), the extent to which citizens have opportunities for input in decision-making (Thibaut & Walker, 1975), the degree of dignified and respectful treatment (Lind & Tyler, 1988), or the impartiality and neutrality of policy implementation (Tyler & Huo, 2002). This is broadly consistent with the ‘process trumps performance’ logic (van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017, p. 98), where policy outcomes become less consequential once the quality of institutional processes are accounted for. In some sense, distrust’s attunement to this deeper functioning of democracy is reassuring, particularly relative to trust’s attunement, given the severity of distrust’s consequences, such as a greater belief in conspiracies and support for violence to confront the distrusted (Gulliver *et al.*, 2023; van Prooijen *et al.*, 2022). Put differently, policy outcome shortcomings alone are unlikely to spark revolts against supposedly harmful political institutions; instead, procedural shortcomings are more likely to impact political distrust (Tyler, 2000). Nonetheless, for citizens to have trust, the outcome side cannot be discounted.

There are limitations that qualify the interpretation of our findings. For the experimental study, while general evaluations were changed as intended, little change in trust and distrust was induced, consistent with the relative stability of political trust (Devine & Valgarðsson, 2024). A key difference between the studies is that the experiment might primarily capture short-term updates based on public service experience information, whereas the cross-sectional results likely reflect more cumulative experience-based evaluations of public services, making any plausible effect smaller. Given the small observed differences, it is doubtful that greater statistical power alone would

have changed this conclusion. At the same time, no post-treatment items directly assessed whether outcome and process information were separately perceived as intended. Future research should examine whether information about procedural and outcome experiences indeed only alter trust and distrust if both are perceived as negative.

For the cross-sectional study, our measures of procedural experiences are grounded in research on procedural fairness (Tyler, 2000), wherein fairness perceptions are primarily understood to stem from processes. However, fairness perceptions can also arise from outcomes (van den Bos *et al.*, 1997). As a result, the observed process effect may reflect fairness perceptions more broadly rather than procedural experiences specifically. We therefore encourage future research to examine whether outcome fairness relates to distrust in a similar way to procedural fairness. Moreover, as we investigated perceptions of procedural experiences across public services used, we are unable to examine the impact of multiple or one specific poor service encounter. Accordingly, it is unclear whether an accumulation of perceived unfair processes, or a single unfair event, bolsters political distrust, which we encourage future research to examine.

In conclusion, taking the political trust literature as the starting point, this study is amongst the first to examine distinct causes of political distrust. Specifically, our results are among the first to show that factors associated with higher trust are not necessarily related with less distrust.

Notes

1. In the pre-registration plan, we use the terms output and throughput. To use terms more aligned with the literature we cite, this was changed to outcome and process.
2. Belgium (Flanders), France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Portugal and Switzerland.
3. Respondents were first asked to indicate which public services (fully or partially provided by national, regional and/or local authorities) they or their closest family used during the past 12 months? The battery listed 10 different public services. Respondents most commonly used general practitioners, hospitals and schools.
4. The operationalization of outcome and procedural experiences mirrors that of De Blok and Kumlin (2022), including a similar but more extensive list of items, and the computation of a mean score. As reported in Appendix B.2., factor analyses show that these items primarily reflect generalized public service process experiences rather than distinct evaluations of specific service characteristics. The correlation between the process and outcome indicators is 0.587. VIF scores of the final regression models (overall sample or by country) never exceed 1.85.
5. The pre-registration can be found here: https://aspredicted.org/W8J_YDD. The original experiment also contained a mistrust hypothesis (Jennings *et al.*, 2021), a political trust orientation not further addressed in this article. We discuss the results of this item in appendix D.4.

6. The smallest detectable standardized effect size using the pooled sample is around 0.15, while this is around 0.35 for country-specific samples. See Appendix A.4 for details.
7. We included a cognitive manipulation check at the end of the experiment, to assess if the respondents remembered how the chat service interaction was experienced (in a negative, positive or ambivalent way). Due to a translation error, the manipulation check proved rather ambivalent for respondents in most countries. See appendix D.2 for more details.

Disclosure statement

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Declaration of generative AI use

During manuscript preparation, the authors used ChatGPT on a limited basis for language refinement and assistance with code for the statistical analyses. The authors reviewed and verified the code and all affected text, confirmed the originality and accuracy of the manuscript, and take full responsibility for its content.

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Data availability statement

The data that supports the findings of this study are openly available in KU Leuven RDR at <http://doi.org/10.48804/URJXSR>.

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