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# Political Trust as an Evaluation against Normative Benchmarks? A Two-wave Survey Experiment on the Role of Normative Benchmarks in the Evaluative Model of Political Trust

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## Abstract

The dominant model that guides scholarly research on political trust rests on the assumption that this attitude is evaluative. It states that citizens evaluate political actors' trustworthiness traits against a set of normative benchmarks. Remarkably, despite its dominance in political trust research and its serious implications for theories on democratic accountability, this assumption has not been tested systematically. This paper tests the micro-level foundations of the trust-as-evaluation model via an extensive two-wave survey experiment among 15,997 respondents. We assess to what extent normative benchmarks of trustworthiness condition citizens' trust in politicians with 11 randomized traits. Our findings challenge the commonly held view of the role of normative benchmarks in the trust-as-evaluation model. While respondents clearly differentiate trustworthy politicians from untrustworthy ones and withdraw trust from politicians with negative traits, their normative benchmarks do not systematically influence this judgment. We discuss the implications of these findings for the trust-as-evaluation model.

## Introduction

Since the 1970s, political trust has been at the forefront of scholarly inquiry. In this comprehensive literature, the evaluative model has emerged as the predominant understanding of political trust (Citrin & Stoker, 2018, p. 57). It posits that political trust reflects a relationship—A trusts B to do X (Hardin, 2002)—in which citizens evaluate political actors' performance. A vast literature found empirical evidence that objective performance and subjective evaluations thereof consistently explain levels, changes, and differences in political trust (see Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Levi & Stoker, 2000 for a review). Yet, these direct effects 'are necessary, but do not provide sufficient evidence for the trust-as-evaluation' model (Van der Meer, 2018, p. 5).

Particularly, this model explicitly argues that political actors are not merely evaluated in a void, but rather against normative benchmarks (Citrin & Stoker, 2018, p. 57; Levi & Stoker, 2000, p. 481; Miller, 1974, p. 952). To Miller and Listhaug (1990, p. 358), political trust "reflects evaluations of whether or not political authorities and institutions are performing *in accordance with the normative expectations held by the public*". Hetherington (2005, p. 9) understands trust as "the degree to which people perceive that government is producing *outcomes consistent with their expectations*". To Dougherty, Lindquist, and Bradbury (2006, p. 178) trust is a "fiduciary concept involving whether the government has fulfilled its responsibility to the people to

operate according to *their normative expectations*". Kaina (2008, p. 515) argues that trust "will be undermined if the representatives of those institutions no longer personify the *central norms and values of their institutions*". In their literature review, Citrin and Stoker (2018, p. 57) argue that "the underlying thread in every hypothesis or finding is that trust declines when governments and institutions fail to meet expected goals or *follow prescribed norms*". [Emphases added by authors].

To the extent that political trust is the outcome of an evaluative process, this evaluation should be conditional on normative benchmarks that citizens value. Empirical research focused extensively on direct causes of political trust, along a wide range of object traits such as their ability, integrity, benevolence, responsiveness, transparency, reliability, decisiveness, empathy, and charisma (cf. Aldering & Vliegenthart, 2016; Bertou, 2019; Hamm, Smidt, & Mayer, 2019; PytlikZillig & Kimbrough, 2016; Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017). However, it has paid very little attention to the role of normative benchmarks against which these object traits should—in theory—be evaluated. The direct effects of object traits are necessary but not sufficiently rigorous evidence for the trust-as-evaluation model (cf. Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015; Rudolph, 2017). Yet, remarkably, the comprehensive literature lacks a systematic empirical test on the essential conditionality of these direct effects of object traits on the normative benchmarks of subjects, except for a few studies

that relied on imperfect proxies (cf. Anderson and Singer, 2008; Mayne & Hakhverdian, 2017).

Insight into the conditioning role of normative benchmarks is important because the trust-as-evaluation model has had far-reaching implications to the field. Theoretically, it has been a driving force behind a.o. theories on the performance-perception gap in political trust (Levi & Stoker, 2000), theories on the impact of generational value change on political trust (Inglehart, 1999), and explanations of the arguable decline of political trust (Miller & Listhaug, 1999). Empirically, the trust-as-evaluation approach has founded many longitudinal and cross-national studies into political trust (Bargsted, Somma, & Castillo, 2017; Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012), particularly those that focus on macro-micro linkages (Mishler & Rose, 2001). Furthermore, the approach is crucial to the understanding of political trust as a general mechanism of democratic accountability (Citrin & Green, 1986; Rosanvallon, 2008).

This paper explicitly tests the conditioning role of normative benchmarks on political trust. Our research design enables a rigorous test of this assumption in three ways. Firstly, with an experimental design, we can simultaneously vary political actors' traits and isolate their effects on citizens' trust. Secondly, we measure and model citizens' normative benchmarks along a broad range of competing traits proposed by the broader literature (Aaldering & Vliegthart, 2016; Bertsou, 2019; Hamm, Smidt, & Mayer, 2019; PytlikZillig & Kimbrough, 2016). Thirdly, we use a longitudinal setup to model the temporal precedence of citizens' normative benchmarks about these traits. Consequently, we performed a factorial survey experiment covering 11 object characteristics among 15,997 respondents in the Netherlands, enriched by panel data collected three weeks earlier, measuring citizens' individual normative benchmarks. Our results do not show a systematic conditioning role for normative benchmarks in citizens' political trust and thereby question a widely held assumption about the understanding of political trust.

## Theory Section

### Political Trust and Normative Benchmarks

Most scholars define political trust as a relational concept, affected both by the disposition and preferences of the subject that trusts (citizens) and the characteristics of the object that is trusted (the institution/actor). The trust-as-evaluation model relies on the interaction between the subject and the object: "It matters not only how a polity performs in terms of the quality of its political process and the economic outputs it produces, but also *who* evaluates this performance" (Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017, p. 85). It thereby tentatively integrates institutional theories of political trust (that theorize how objects traits such as performance determine political trust rates) with cultural theories (that emphasize the role of political socialization of subjects who do or do not trust). The institutional and cultural theories are connected by the link between objects' traits and subjects' benchmarks.

Scholars argue political trust to be an evaluation of political actors' actual traits (e.g., their performance) against subjective benchmarks for how these actors are expected to perform, either empirically or normatively (e.g., Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Levi & Stoker, 2000; Mayne & Hakhverdian, 2017). A variety of labels has been employed to emphasize the relevance of such benchmarks. These labels include

"prescribed norms" (Citrin & Stoker, 2018, p. 57), "normative expectations" (Dougherty, Lindquist, & Bradbury, 2006, p. 178; Hawdon, 2008, p. 186; Miller & Listhaug, 1990, p. 358), "trust norms" (Braithwaite, 1998, p. 48), and "values" (Levi and Stoker, 2000, p. 481). While these terms represent distinct psychological concepts, they are employed more loosely in the political science literature on political trust to refer to aspirational standards against which judgments occur. This paper refers to them as normative benchmarks.<sup>1</sup>

Many studies tested the direct effects of object traits on subjects' levels of trust. Trust in politics is higher, for instance, when the economy performs well (cf. Van der Meer, 2018) and when procedures are fair (cf. Tyler, 1998). These direct effects of object traits are a necessary but not a sufficient element of the trust-as-evaluation model. If political trust is purely object-driven—that is, when citizens do not draw on any benchmark to evaluate politicians—that would make trust purely situational. Citizens would not evaluate against any benchmark but simply respond to any change in the object. That would fundamentally change the assumed individual-level mechanism behind much of the literature on political trust. The conditionality of the impact of object traits on subjects' normative benchmarks is key to the evaluative model.

Nevertheless, despite the theoretical centrality of normative benchmarks, very few studies have tested this conditionality empirically. Some studies measured normative benchmarks indirectly, using group differences such as educational level (Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012) and left-right ideological placement (Anderson & Singer, 2008) as proxies, and assuming that different normative benchmarks are at play. By contrast, direct measures make fewer assumptions about the distribution of normative benchmarks across social groups and provide individual-level measures needed to test the trust-as-evaluation model. Furthermore, the cross-sectional designs of previous studies—in which benchmarks and trust in political actors are measured simultaneously—do not enable them to ensure the temporal precedence of benchmarks (cf. Seyd, 2015). As a result, they cannot differentiate between reported normative benchmarks for evaluations and justifications of prior attitudes. And yet, establishing the temporal precedence of normative benchmarks is crucial to test the trust-as-evaluation model. Existing studies of the model implicitly assume that benchmarks exist *a priori*. If people compare political actors against normative benchmarks, these benchmarks ought to exist before the evaluation takes place. Hence, testing the model requires that we establish, at least empirically, the *a priori* nature of these benchmarks while minimizing the risks of rationalization.

This is not merely a matter of methodological rigor, but a necessity to differentiate between normative benchmarks and rivaling theoretical explanations. One rivaling approach understands political trust as a heuristic that people use to evaluate (e.g., Hetherington, 2005; see Rudolph, 2017 for an overview). That approach inverts, to some extent, the causal

<sup>1</sup> The evaluative model is agnostic about the sources of these individually held benchmarks as shared by broader society or not. Therefore, in line with the literature on political trust on which we build (e.g., Anderson & Singer, 2008; Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012; Seyd, 2015; Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017) we operationalize and model these normative benchmarks as individual traits—that is what individuals themselves indicate as their benchmark—as the minimal condition for the trust-as-evaluation approach.

direction of the relationship between trust and evaluations. Alternatively, trust in specific political actors may be induced by one's long-lasting disposition toward politics and politicians in general. Research into motivated reasoning highlights our tendency to process information in ways that confirm prior beliefs (Taber & Lodge, 2006). In that perspective, a political trust may not be a direct function of an actor's trustworthiness evaluated against citizens' normative benchmarks. Instead, reported normative benchmarks, evaluations, and levels of trust may reflect various reasoning and rationalizing processes we employ to harmonize prior beliefs. We see such processes at play in the overwhelming relevance of partisan biases in polarized settings such as the contemporary United States.

While alternative approaches to trust do not discredit the trust-as-evaluation model, they do complicate the more simplistic version of it. It emphasizes the need to isolate the constituent elements of normative benchmarks substantively and temporally. Figure 1 portrays this conditional role of normative benchmarks in citizens' evaluations of politicians.

### Hypotheses

All in all, we formulate three hypotheses on the complex relationship among normative benchmarks, evaluations, and political trust. The first and second hypotheses build up to our central and third hypothesis. First, as a baseline of the trust-as-evaluation model, we assume that political trust reflects an evaluation of political objects' traits:

H1. Politicians' possession of traits that signal trustworthiness stimulates the trust citizens have in them; politicians' traits that signal a lack of trustworthiness erodes the trust that citizens have in them.

Furthermore, the evaluation of political objects might be sensitive to negativity bias. It reflects individuals' tendencies to formulate a worse evaluation "than the algebraic sum of the subjective values would predict" (Rozin & Royzman, 2001, p. 299). Negativity bias suggests that a single negative characteristic has a stronger impact on levels of trust than a single positive characteristic. Such asymmetries have been noted in the political trust literature at both the macro-level (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2008) and the micro-level (Wroe, 2016). Such studies conclude that the effects of negative messages on political trust are stronger than those of positive messages (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015). We expect such negativity bias to play a role in citizens' evaluations of political actors' characteristics of trustworthiness. This is visible when the additive function of positive and negative characteristics of trustworthiness is biased in favor of negative characteristics.

H2. The cumulation of object traits that signal a lack of trustworthiness has a stronger effect on citizens' trust in politicians than the cumulation of traits that signal trustworthiness.

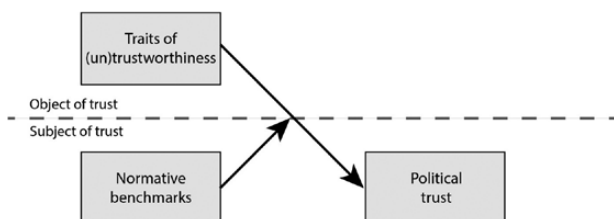


Figure 1. Micro-level foundation of the trust-as-evaluation model.

Finally, the linchpin of the trust-as-evaluation model of political trust reads that citizens evaluate political actors' characteristics against their own normative benchmarks (Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Van der Meer, 2018). We can break down this argument into two minimal components: internal consistency (individual citizens should care more about performances and behavior that align with their personal normative benchmarks), and temporal precedence (benchmarks should temporally precede and condition subsequent evaluations). While we may consider auxiliary components—for instance about the social embeddedness of the individually held normative benchmarks—these other components are not essential to the micro-level foundation of the trust-as-evaluation model.<sup>2</sup> Hence, we formulate the final hypothesis:

H3. Object traits that signal (a lack of) trustworthiness have a stronger effect on citizens' trust in politicians when these traits correspond to the normative benchmarks that are most salient to them.

### Normative Benchmarks

Any test of the trust-as-evaluation model hinges on our understanding of the most relevant benchmarks that citizens generally rely on to evaluate. Citizens are likely to simultaneously weigh multiple criteria in their evaluations of political actors. Yet, there is no consensus on these criteria, within or between different research traditions (McEvily & Tortoriello, 2011).

First, social and organizational psychology focuses on competence and warmth as universal dimensions of social judgment (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007), to explain trust in political leaders (Bertsou 2019, p. 221; Fiske & Durante 2014; Hamm, Smidt, & Mayer, 2019). Second, research into political leadership has identified six recurrent traits: craftsmanship, vigor, integrity, responsiveness, charisma, and consistency (Aaldering & Vliegthart, 2016). Third, political trust research has particularly emphasized the unique nature of democratic leadership (cf. Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017), particularly pointing to factors such as procedural fairness (Tyler, 1998) as well as encapsulated interest (Hardin, 2000) and accountability (Magalhães, 2006). In the political trust literature these particularly democratic traits are tested in tandem with more general leadership traits such as competence, intrinsic commitment (care), and reliability (Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017).

Throughout these research traditions, we identify nine central criteria, which we discuss shortly below: ability, integrity, benevolence, responsiveness, transparency, reliability, decisiveness, empathy, and charisma. *Ability* refers to the competence (craftsmanship) and knowledge (expertise) required to carry out a task that one is entrusted with (Levi & Stoker, 2000, p. 476). *Integrity* is the ethical consideration that the object "adheres to a set of principles that the trustor finds acceptable" (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995, p. 719). Ability and integrity are consistently cited across all three research traditions.

<sup>2</sup> Subjectively held normative benchmarks may find their origin in social networks, political media, or civic cultures. Regardless, in the trust-as-evaluation model, normative benchmarks only have an effect via individuals' awareness of these benchmarks. Hence, this study focuses on the theoretical core.

Next, political trustworthiness entails *benevolence*, the willingness to act in the interest of others (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). *Responsiveness* refers to the trustee's willingness to listen to public opinion and awareness of the concerns of the trustor(s) (Aaldering & Vliegenthart, 2016, p. 1879). *Transparency* balances out information asymmetries between the trustor (citizens) and the trustee (political actor), a prerequisite to hold so that accountability may occur. The extent to which transparency itself contributes to trust is, however, debated (compare Jennings, 1998, p. 232; Grimmelikhuisen & Meijer, 2014). Benevolence, responsiveness, and transparency may but need not go hand in hand. All three fall under the header of procedural fairness (Tyler & Jackson, 2014, pp. 81–82).

*Steadfastness* refers to the extent to which the trustee has been reliable and consistent in the past, and may therefore be extrapolated into the present (Braithwaite, 1998; cf. Hardin, 2000). *Decisiveness* is the ability to make decisions in a timely manner in the face of uncertainty (Bernheim & Bodoh-Creed, 2017, p. 4). *Empathy* refers to a political actor's ability to take the perspective of another person (McDonald, 2021). Finally, leadership studies understand *charisma* as leaders' personal appeal (Aaldering & Vliegenthart, 2016).

There is no *a priori* empirical reason to consider any of these criteria a better or even a more likely explanation of political trustworthiness than others. Indeed “the relative influence of these alternative [criteria of trust] is controversial” (Citrin & Stoker, 2018, 57). Ultimately, it is an empirical question of which criteria citizens incorporate in their evaluations of political actors. For the purpose of this paper, we remain agnostic about which of these criteria is most relevant for political trust. Rather, we model all nine criteria—both as *descriptive traits* of the trustees (political actors) and as the trustors' (citizens) *normative benchmarks*—to test the trust-as-evaluation model.

## Data and Methods

### Data

In order to test our hypotheses, we fielded a two-wave survey experiment in a public opinion panel organized by the Dutch public daily news show, EenVandaag. This survey experiment met four requirements to test our hypotheses. Firstly, respondents' benchmarks must be measured prior to the experiment. Measuring trust first, as a few studies have done (Jennings, 1998; Seyd, 2015), runs the risk that benchmarks de facto measure justifications of previous trust. We used a panel design in which we measured citizens' normative benchmarks in Wave 1 and political trust in Wave 2.

Secondly, we need direct measures of a broad set of normative benchmarks. Our survey measures are based on the nine criteria mentioned above. Moreover, the set of normative benchmarks in Wave 1 needs to be equivalent to the traits of political actors that citizens' are asked to evaluate in Wave 2. This provides the most direct way to test the effects of normative benchmarks on respondents' subsequent evaluation.

Thirdly, a survey experiment is needed to draw causal inferences. We used a factorial survey experiment in Wave 2 to assess whether political actors' characteristics causally influence respondents' political trust. Together, Waves 1 and 2 allow us to test the trust-as-evaluation model of political trust, by assessing whether respondents' normative benchmarks influence their evaluation of political actors.

Fourthly, the experiment required a lot of statistical power. We aimed to run it on a broad cross-section of society that is not used to participating in survey experiments. Roughly 25,000 (unpaid) respondents participate in weekly online surveys fielded by EenVandaag. As the EenVandaag panel seldom hosts survey experiments, the experiment is less likely to suffer from the Hawthorne effect. While the participants in our experiment are not randomly selected, the sample comprises a broad cross-section of the Dutch electorate whose trends and correlates in a political trust are very similar to those in random samples.<sup>3</sup> Because the sample overrepresents politically engaged and higher educated respondents, this experiment is more likely to find conditional effects of politicians' objective traits on respondent normative benchmarks. We considered weighting the sample. However, that would only be possible along three criteria that match information from the general adult population (voting behavior, gender, and education), and would lead to some strong weights (particularly on non-voters and low-educated respondents). We, therefore, created these weights as a robustness check: Their in- or exclusion did not substantially affect our conclusions.<sup>4</sup> For their limitations, we report the non-weighted results.

## Experimental Design

### Wave 1

In Wave 1 (July 2019), we measured respondents' normative benchmarks. The anonymous environment of the survey experiment allows respondents to share these normative benchmarks in the absence of direct social pressures of conformity. In order to check whether benchmarks substantively differ from justifications, we employed a split-sample design resulting in two groups. In Group 1, we focused on measuring *respondent's normative benchmarks*. We first asked respondents to select *three* of nine normative benchmarks *they find important for trusting politicians* in Parliament and subsequently asked them to indicate how much trust they had in MPs and the government, and how satisfied they were with democracy in the Netherlands. In Group 2, we first asked respondents how much trust they had in MPs (on a 5-point scale, running from “No trust at all” to “A lot of trust”) and *subsequently* asked them to justify their answer by selecting three out of nine arguments, a rephrasing of the same characteristics as group 1.<sup>5</sup>

### Wave 2

Three weeks after the first wave, we fielded a second survey that included a factorial survey experiment.<sup>6</sup> We set up the situation in which we ask about trust to be salient as well as rather generic. Our experiment consisted of a vignette

<sup>3</sup> Most notably, the sample overrepresents politically engaged respondents. This makes it a most-likely scenario to find conditional effects of politicians' objective traits on respondents' normative benchmarks.

<sup>4</sup> Weights could only be created on these three variables in alignment with population estimates. Other traits did not have corresponding registry data or mass survey data that were sufficiently identical to the questions in the 1VOP. Weights were particularly large on the interaction of low-educated non-voters and low-educated voters for migrant party DENK. The weight did not substantially affect the experimental effects.

<sup>5</sup> For respondents who answered “neither trust nor distrust,” we used a follow-up question about whether they tend to trust or distrust, before asking for justifications.

<sup>6</sup> See Appendix 1 Figure 1 for an overview of our study's randomization procedures and Appendix 1 Table 1 for a breakdown of the sample size per group.

**Table 1.** Experimental Groups and Sample Size

		Wave 1 measures			
		Wave 1 group 1 Benchmarks	Wave 1 group 2 Justifications	New respondents (not in Wave 1)	Total respondents
Wave 2 Experiments	Shortened experiment	<i>CELL III</i> 2488 (Table 4) (Figure 6)	<i>CELL V</i> 2678 (robustness check)	2765	<i>CELL I</i> 7931 (Figure 3)
	Full experiment <sup>1</sup>	<i>CELL IV</i> 5227 (Table 5) (Figure 6)	<i>CELL VI</i> 5098 (robustness check)	5672	<i>CELL II</i> 15997 (Figure 4) (Figure 5)
	Total respondent	7715	7776	8437	23928

<sup>1</sup> Wave 2 Full Experiment.

a. Oversample of all positive vignette and sentence order 1 ( $n = 366$ ).

b. Sentence Order 1 [1,2,3,4,5] ( $n = 7,794$ ).

c. Sentence Order 2 [4,5,1,2,3] ( $n = 7837$ ).

that introduced respondents to a local politician chosen to replace an outgoing national MP of the same political party. This situation is realistic, but the politicians in the experiment are hypothetical, both to prevent the influence of a range of preconceptions/biases and to enable the random assignment of positive and negative traits to these politicians.<sup>7</sup> Should we have relied on real rather than fictitious politicians, the experiment would be less successful in isolating the mechanisms. We would expect that respondents' preconceptions and affective biases toward real politicians would make them less sensitive to a singular experimental treatment, as new information (provided in the experiment needs) to be assessed against existing information and sentiments.

We kept the text as short as possible to prevent any possible bias in the respondents' views of the hypothetical candidate. The vignette randomized the description of the hypothetical politician along *nine trustworthiness traits* (described in the section below), as well as gender and party affiliation. Respondents were each assigned to a single vignette, and asked to rate the trustworthiness of the hypothetical politician presented to them.

We employed two types of vignettes: a vignette that includes all 11 factors (full experiment), and a vignette that only includes a single trustworthiness trait next to gender and party (shortened vignette). The former is our main study, and the latter functions as a check on the full experiment. Our main study focuses on the full experiment, to which we assigned 15,997 respondents. The combination of 9 trustworthiness traits varying along a positive and negative formulation, gender (male/female), and 3 political parties resulted in a survey experiment with  $3 \times 2^{10}$  design or 3072 unique vignettes. Data collection thus meets the definition of a full-factorial design (all combinations of all treatments have an equal change of occurrence), even though we do not estimate all the potential interactions between these treatments. The fully random between-person design allows us to minimize rationalization of responses. Because the odds of obtaining a full positive vignette are rather small, we oversampled respondents assigned to a *perfect vignette* ( $n = 366$ ), to ensure a sizeable reference by which to assess our hypothesis on negativity bias (H2).

<sup>7</sup> Because Dutch parliamentary elections are based on a party-list proportional system, MPs who resign during their terms are replaced by a member of the same party who was next eligible according to the election result.

In the full experiment, the nine trustworthiness traits were presented in *five sentences*: four sentences dealing with two characteristics, one sentence with one characteristic.<sup>8</sup> To account for any order effects, we randomly assigned the *sequence of the two traits within a sentence*, the *sequence of sentences themselves* (cf. Auspurg & Jäckle, 2017) as well as the *positive and negative wording* (see Appendix 1 Table 2).<sup>9,10</sup>

While more attributes make the vignette more realistic, we run the risk of overburdening respondents via eleven attributes.<sup>11</sup> To assess the reliability of the inferences derived from the full experiment, we assigned a smaller group of respondents ( $n = 7931$ ) that consists of one of the nine trustworthiness traits, as well as gender and political party. This yields a factorial design with 3 (parties)  $\times$  2 (gender)  $\times$  18 ( $9 \times 2$  characteristics), resulting in 108 unique vignettes. Table 1 provides an overview of our sample size across each experimental group.

One concern with this number of factors in a factorial design such as ours is the risk of sparsely populated cells, which could lead to non-significant findings. However, we warrant statistical power in both parts of the study. First, in the shortened experiment (in which respondents received one single trustworthiness trait), we modeled the conditional effect independent from the nature of the trait. Hence, rather than testing the interaction effects on 18 small groups, we could benefit from the full statistical power and test it for the whole subsample at once. Second, while the full experiment covers 3072 unique vignettes, the assignment of respondent to each trait is random. As we do not focus on the  $n$ th interactions between these traits, but rather on their direct effects, we will not suffer from the problem that some of these 3072 cells would be sparsely populated. Hence, we benefit from the full statistical power

<sup>8</sup> (1) responsiveness and benevolence (2) charisma and empathy (3) integrity and transparency (4) decisiveness and reliability (5) ability.

<sup>9</sup> We randomized both the factor presented first in each sentence, as well as the sentence order, namely as 1,2,3,4,5 (cf. Box 1), or 4,5,1,2,3.

<sup>10</sup> This results in eight unique combinations per sentence (see Appendix 1 Table 2A).

<sup>11</sup> There is no consensus about the maximum number of vignette attributes. Rules of thumb vary from 7 to 18 (cf. Auspurg & Hinz, 2015; Bansak, Hainmueller, Hopkins, & Yamamoto, 2021).

of the subsample, with the effect of each trait being random over all other traits.

## Operationalization

### Objects' trustworthiness traits

Table 2 provides an overview of the operationalization of all the randomized characteristics in our vignettes in Wave 2. Boxes 1 and 2 provide two of the resulting full experiment vignettes (Appendix 1 Table 2B presents the shortened vignette).

### Normative benchmarks

The randomized trustworthiness traits used in the vignettes perfectly mirror our operationalization of normative benchmarks and justifications in Wave 1. Table 3 provides an overview of the sequence of questions used in Wave 1 to measure either benchmarks (Cells III and IV in Table 1) or justifications (Cells V and VI) in a split-half sample of respondents (see the section Experimental design: Wave 1, above) (Figure 2).

When asked to indicate the three most important *normative benchmarks* to trust MPs, the most prevalent answers are Integrity (mentioned by 57.3% of respondents), Transparency (50.8%), Ability (50.1%), and Responsiveness (44%). The first three are less commonly mentioned to justify (dis)trust. By contrast, the most important *justifications*

**Table 2.** Trustworthiness Traits, Party and Gender in Vignettes (Wave 2)

Trustworthiness traits	Operationalization
Ability	(+) positive— <i>is knowledgeable</i> .
9.	(-) negative— <i>is not very knowledgeable</i> .
Integrity	(+) <i>has shown integrity</i>
5.	(-) <i>has shown little integrity</i> ,
Benevolence	(+) <i>tries to do what is good for people in [her/his] municipality</i>
1.	(-) <i>mostly does what is best for [her/himself]</i>
Responsiveness	(+) <i>listens to [her/his] followers</i>
	(-) <i>does not always listen to [her/his] followers</i>
Transparency	(+) positive— <i>is open and transparent toward people in [her/his] municipality</i> ;
6.	(-) negative— <i>is not entirely open and transparent toward people in [her/his] municipality</i> ;
Reliability	(+) positive— <i>is steadfast</i>
8.	(-) negative— <i>is not very steadfast</i> ;
Decisiveness	(+) positive— <i>is decisive</i>
7.	(-) negative— <i>is not very decisive</i>
Empathy	(+) <i>has a lot of empathy</i> ;
4.	(-) <i>with little empathy</i> ;
Charisma	(+) <i>has an appealing personality</i>
3.	(-) <i>without an appealing personality</i>
Political Party	<i>GroenLinks (Green Left)</i> <i>CDA(Christian Democratic Appeal)</i> <i>PVV (Party for Freedom)</i>
Gender	Male— <i>He/his/him</i> Female— <i>She/her</i>

Note: (all *varied factors* are italicized; *trustworthiness traits* are underlined)

### Box 1. Full Experiment—Most Positive Vignette

**Background:** Every now and then members of the House of Representatives must stop their work prematurely, for example, due to illness or other personal circumstances. In such cases, the member of parliament is replaced by the next person on the list of candidates of the same party in the last election.

Imagine a member of the Lower House of the [Party] resigns in the first year after the elections for health reasons. A candidate from the same party has been appointed to take over the seat of the departing member of parliament. This candidate has been active in local politics in recent years. Various newspapers from [her/his] municipality describe [her/him] as *someone who listens to [her/his] followers and tries to do what is good for people in [her/his] municipality*; a politician with an *appealing personality and a lot of empathy*; a politician who *has shown integrity*, and *is open and transparent toward people in [her/his] municipality*; a politician who is *decisive and steadfast*; a politician who is *knowledgeable*. [She/He] will be appointed as a member of the Second Chamber for the remainder of the Cabinet term.

### Box 2. Full Experiment—Most Negative Vignette

**Background:** Every now and then members of the House of Representatives must stop their work prematurely, for example, due to illness or other personal circumstances. In such cases, the member of parliament is replaced by the next person on the list of candidates of the same party in the last election

Imagine a member of the Lower House of the [Party] resigns in the first year after the elections for health reasons. A candidate from the same party has been appointed to take over the seat of the departing member of parliament. This candidate has been active in local politics in recent years. Various newspapers from [her/his] municipality describe [her/him] as *someone who does not always listen to [her/his] followers and mostly does what is best for [herself/himself]*; a politician without an *appealing personality and with little empathy*; a politician who *has shown little integrity*, and *is not entirely open and transparent toward people in [her/his] municipality*; a politician who is neither *very decisive* nor *steadfast*; a politician who is *not very knowledgeable*. [She/He] will be appointed as a member of the Second Chamber for the remainder of the Cabinet term.

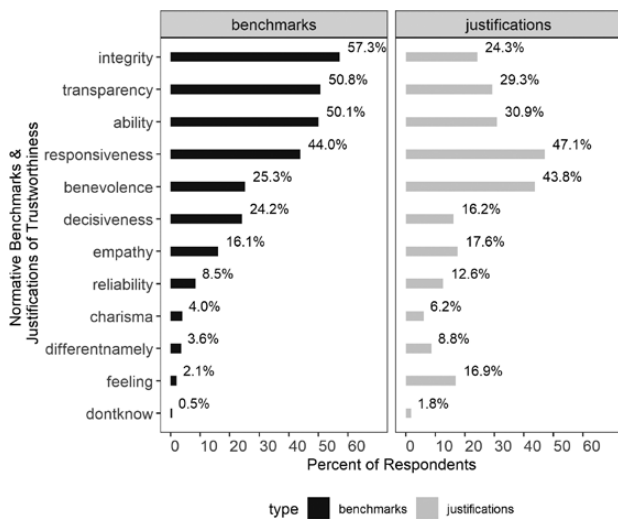
Note. (all *varied factors* are italicized; *trustworthiness traits* are underlined).

for (dis)trust in MPs are Responsiveness (47.1%) and Benevolence (43.8%). The latter features nearly twice as prominently than in Group 1. The share of respondents who justified their attitudes by noting that “it was just a feeling” stands out. While only 2.1% of respondents mention this feeling as a criterion to trust, 16.9% of respondents use it to justify their (dis)trust. All in all, these patterns suggest that respondents' benchmarks and justifications may represent different cognitive processes.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Normative benchmarks may also differ by prior levels of trust (see Appendix 1 Figure 1B). Many more respondents who went on to express distrust in MPs (Wave 1) selected responsiveness (listening) as a benchmark.

**Table 3.** Operationalization of Benchmarks and Justifications of Political Trust (Wave 1)

Benchmarks (Cells III and IV)	Justifications (Cells V and VI)
<p>Question 1: Benchmarks What are the most important criteria for you to trust or not trust politicians in the House of Representatives? (Choose a maximum of three criteria from the list below)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Knowledge and Competence</li> <li>○ Decisiveness</li> <li>○ Doing what is best for the country and their supporters</li> <li>○ Listening to what the people in the country want</li> <li>○ Steadfastness</li> <li>○ Openness and Transparency</li> <li>○ Integrity</li> <li>○ Appealing Personality</li> <li>○ Empathy</li> <li>○ Other, namely _____</li> <li>○ It is mainly a feeling</li> <li>○ I do not know</li> </ul> <p>Question 2: Trust Level How much trust do you have in politicians in the House of Representatives?</p>	<p>Question 1: Trust Level How much trust do you have in politicians in the House of Representatives?</p> <p>Question 2: Justifications You just indicated that you have <u> [stated level] </u> of trust in politicians in the House. Below are a number of reasons why people trust politicians in the House of Representatives. Which of these are the most important to you? (maximum 3).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ They are [not] knowledgeable and competent</li> <li>○ They are [not] decisive</li> <li>○ They [mainly] do what is best for [themselves] the country and their supporters</li> <li>○ They [do not] listen to what the people in the country want</li> <li>○ They are [not] steadfast</li> <li>○ They are [not] open and transparent</li> <li>○ They [do not] have integrity</li> <li>○ They [do not] have an appealing personality</li> <li>○ They have [no] empathy</li> <li>○ Other, namely _____</li> <li>○ It is mainly a feeling</li> <li>○ I do not know</li> </ul>



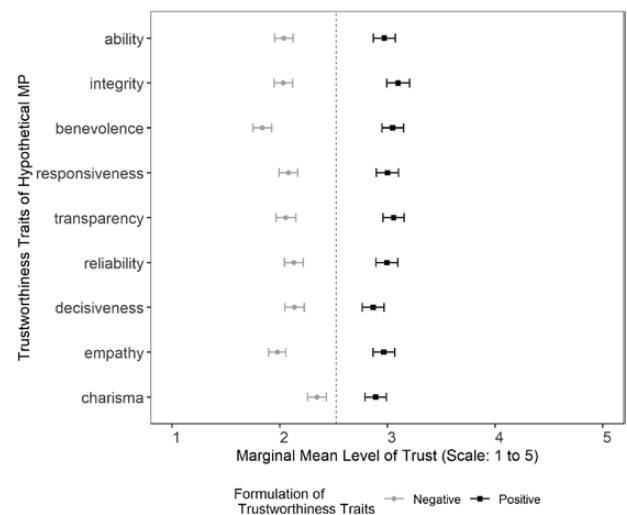
**Figure 2.** Benchmarks and Justifications of trust in MPs (in % respondents), wave 1.

**Analytical Setup**

For ease of interpretability, we rely on a series of multivariate OLS models.<sup>13</sup> These models control for respondents’ vote choice in the 2017 Dutch general election, their age, education level, and gender, for the hypothesized politicians’ political party and gender, as well as the match between the party preference of the voter and the hypothesized politician. Differences in marginal means assess the heterogeneity of the effects of traits that do and that do not match the benchmarks that respondents selected in Wave 1 (cf. Leeper, Hobolt & Tilley 2020).

We build up our analysis in a step-wise fashion. We first present the marginal means of the shortened experiment (Cell I in Table 1) followed by those of the full experiment (Cell II in Table 1). This allows us to test whether positive and negative

<sup>13</sup> Our results remain unchanged when we fit an ordered logistic model (see supplementary materials).



**Figure 3.** Marginal mean level of trust per traits.

traits affect respondents’ political trust as hypothesized in H1 (the effects of trustworthiness traits) and H2 (negativity bias). We subsequently present tests of evaluations against normative benchmarks (H3) in the short experiment (Cell III in Table 1) and the full experiment (Cell IV in Table 1).

**Results I: Main Effects**

**Effects of Positive and Negative Traits (H1)**

**Shortened Factorial Experiment**

We carefully build up our analyses, starting with the main effects of the shortened experiment (Cell I in Table 1). Figure 3 visualizes these effects via marginal means, which represent the average trust levels in the hypothetical MP across all vignettes with a given trustworthiness trait. These means are marginalized across all other vignette dimensions and adjustment variables (see a detailed model in Appendix 1 Table 3, Model 1), namely: politician’s (1) gender and political party (2) respondents’ past



vote choice (2017), gender, age-group, education, and match between politician’s party and respondent’s past vote choice. We use these control variables in all of our presented models.

Unsurprisingly, and consistent with our first hypothesis (H1), we find that hypothetical politicians with positive trustworthiness traits are trusted more. The average level of trust, across all respondent and vignette characteristics, is 2.52 (dotted black line). The point estimates and 95% confidence intervals show that each positive trait has a positive effect on trust in the hypothetical politician. Likewise, each negative

vignette trait has a negative effect on trust in the hypothetical politician.

**Full Experiment**

Figure 4 provides the marginal means of trust in the hypothetical politician in the full experiment (Cell 2 in Table 1). The marginal means show the effects of a positive over a negative formulation of each trait, marginalized over all the other respondent and vignette characteristics (see Appendix 1 Table 3, Model 2). Intriguingly, by offering more information on the hypothetical politician, trust dropped to a grand mean of 2.22. Moreover, the marginal means of the traits are considerably smaller in the full experiment than in the shortened experiment. This is to be expected given the larger number of traits individuals had to rate and given the combination of positive and negative traits across each vignette.

Similar to the shortened experiment, respondents have more trust in politicians described positively. All positive trustworthiness traits have a positive effect on trust in the hypothetical politician. Three effects stand out: benevolence (positive description leads to a marginal mean of 2.44), integrity (2.40), and ability (2.38). Overall these results support our first hypothesis (H1).

**Negativity Bias (H2)**

We find a slight negativity bias. Figure 5 plots the marginal mean level of trust in the hypothetical politician by the sum of positive traits, running from 0 to 9. The absence of negativity bias would imply rather linear cumulative effects, or else a rather balanced s-shaped curve (in which a singular positive trait has a similarly strong effect as a singular negative trait).

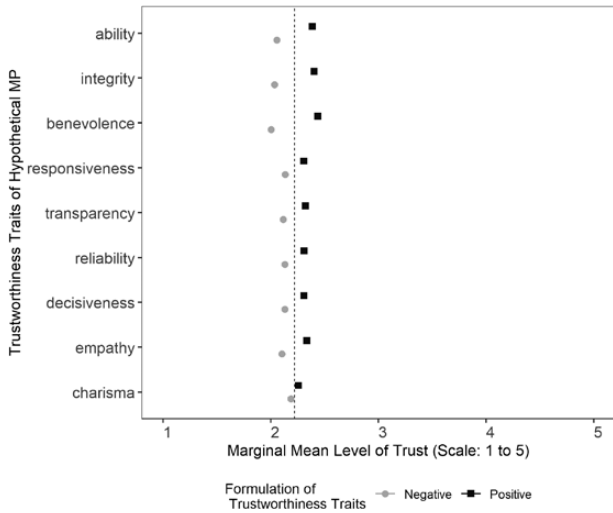


Figure 4. Marginal mean level of trust per trait.

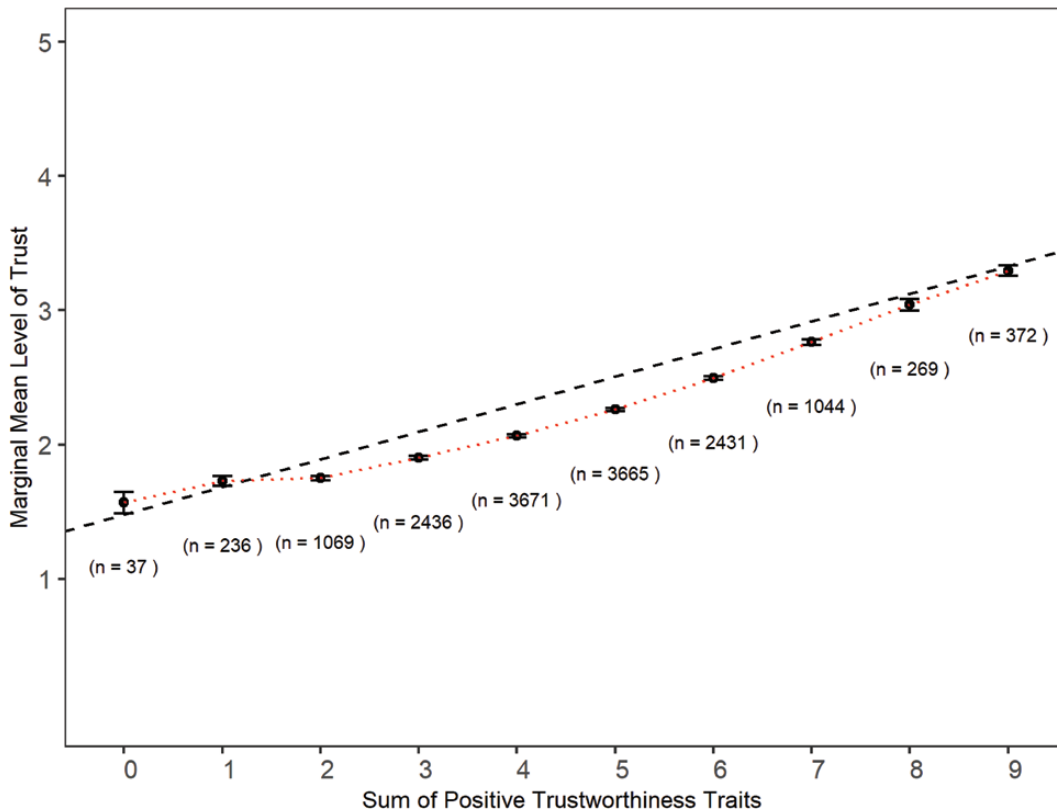


Figure 5. Negativity bias: Marginal mean level of trust by sum of positive traits.

Instead, we find a non-linear effect between number of positive traits and trust.

The skewed pattern in Figure 5 shows that the marginal effect of each subsequent negative trait declines. Against a reference of a flawless politician (9 positive traits, 0 negative traits), respondents disproportionately penalize politicians for the first few flaws: more than 45% of the total effect range

of positivity (1.73 points on a trust scale of 1–5) is due to the first three negative traits (i.e., in the vignettes with 8 positive and 1 negative traits; 7 positive and 2 negative; 6 positive and 3 negative). This suggests that respondents are much quicker to discard trust for a few blemishes, whereas the marginal effect of subsequent negative traits diminishes to flatten out at the most negative vignettes. Inversely, we do not find a

**Table 4.** Interaction Between Respondents' Normative Benchmarks and Object's Trustworthiness Traits Explaining Trust in Hypothetical Politician (OLS Regressions)

	(Short Experiment) M1: Interaction Model Cell III - Sample	(Full Experiment) M2: Interaction Model Cell IV - Sample
Constant	2.60*** (0.29)	2.01*** (0.23)
Main Effect: Positive Trait	0.80*** (0.05)	
Main Effect: Congruent Benchmark	-0.11* (0.06)	
Interaction: Positive Trait x Congruent Benchmark	0.25*** (0.08)	
Trustworthiness Traits (t) (Wave 2)		
ability (t)		0.24*** (0.04)
integrity (t)		0.31*** (0.04)
benevolence (t)		0.42*** (0.03)
responsiveness (t)		0.15*** (0.04)
transparency (t)		0.19*** (0.04)
reliability (t)		0.15*** (0.03)
decisiveness (t)		0.21*** (0.03)
empathy (t)		0.20*** (0.03)
charisma (t)		0.03 (0.03)
Normative Benchmarks (b) (Wave 1)		
ability (b)		-0.03 (0.05)
integrity (b)		-0.01 (0.05)
benevolence (b)		0.13** (0.05)
responsiveness (b)		-0.09* (0.05)
transparency (b)		-0.05 (0.05)
reliability (b)		0.14* (0.08)
decisiveness (b)		0.02 (0.05)
empathy (b)		0.07 (0.06)
charisma (b)		-0.08 (0.10)
Interaction: Traits x Respondent's Benchmarks		
ability (t*b)		0.17*** (0.05)
integrity (t*b)		0.01 (0.05)
benevolence (t*b)		-0.05 (0.06)
responsiveness (t*b)		0.01 (0.05)
transparency (t*b)		-0.04 (0.05)
reliability (t*b)		-0.14 (0.09)
decisiveness (t*b)		-0.004 (0.06)
empathy (t*b)		-0.07 (0.07)
charisma (t*b)		0.07 (0.14)
Observations	2,286	4,969
R <sup>2</sup>	0.25	0.20
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.24	0.19
Residual Std. Error	0.93 (df = 2258)	0.93 (df = 4915)
F Statistic	28.28*** (df = 27; 2258)	22.98*** (df = 53; 4915)

Standard errors in (parentheses).

All models control for politician's party and gender (see Appendix 1 Tables 5A and 5B for more details) and respondents' gender, age group, education level, Vote choice in the 2017 general elections, and Match between politician's party and respondent's vote choice in 2017.

Note. \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001.

disproportionally strong positive effect of the first positive trait(s) in comparison to a completely flawed politician.

**Evaluation against Normative Benchmarks (H3)**

The final and central tests of our paper concern H3, namely the conditionality of the vignette effects on respondents' normative benchmarks. We model an interaction between respondents' benchmarks and the matching trait of the hypothetical politician in the vignette.

Table 4 Model 1 presents the results of the shortened experiment (see a detailed model in Appendix 1 Table 5A, Model 3). Because the assignment of 1 of 18 traits in the shortened experiment leads to rather sparsely populated cells, we present a trait-agnostic analysis. This enables us to assess whether the effect of a politician's trait is conditional on its congruence with respondents' normative benchmarks across all traits. The results reveal a significant interaction between a positive trustworthiness trait and a congruent Wave 1 benchmark. When assigned to rate a politician described along a single trustworthiness trait, those who received a benchmark-matching trait placed more trust in the hypothetical politician than those who did not.

The design of the full experiment enables us to assess the conditionality of traits on normative benchmarks along each trait. Table 4 Model 2 shows that the findings of our

full experiment are not consistent with our main hypothesis (H3) (see a detailed model in Appendix 1 Table 5B, Model 3). With the exception of ability, we find no interaction effects between respondent's benchmarks and the traits of the hypothetical politician. On average, a match between the benchmarks respondents reported in Wave 1 and a trait identical to that benchmark in the vignette in Wave 2 does not matter for the level of trust placed in the hypothetical MP. Respondents placed more trust in politicians with positive traits, regardless of whether these traits matched their normative benchmarks.

Figure 6 visualizes the difference between the marginal mean of a positive and negative trait for respondents whose benchmarks matched that trait and for those whose benchmarks did not. The vertical line of 0 represents no difference in marginal means between individuals who received a positive trait and those who received a negative trait. We hypothesized that the difference in trust between positive and negative trustworthiness traits will be larger when the trait matches the respondents' normative benchmarks.

However, our findings paint a considerably more nuanced picture that challenges the trust-as-evaluation model. On the one hand, as shown in Figure 6 panel A, when we assign respondents to a single trait (shortened experiment), the trust gap between positive and negative traits is wider if that trait

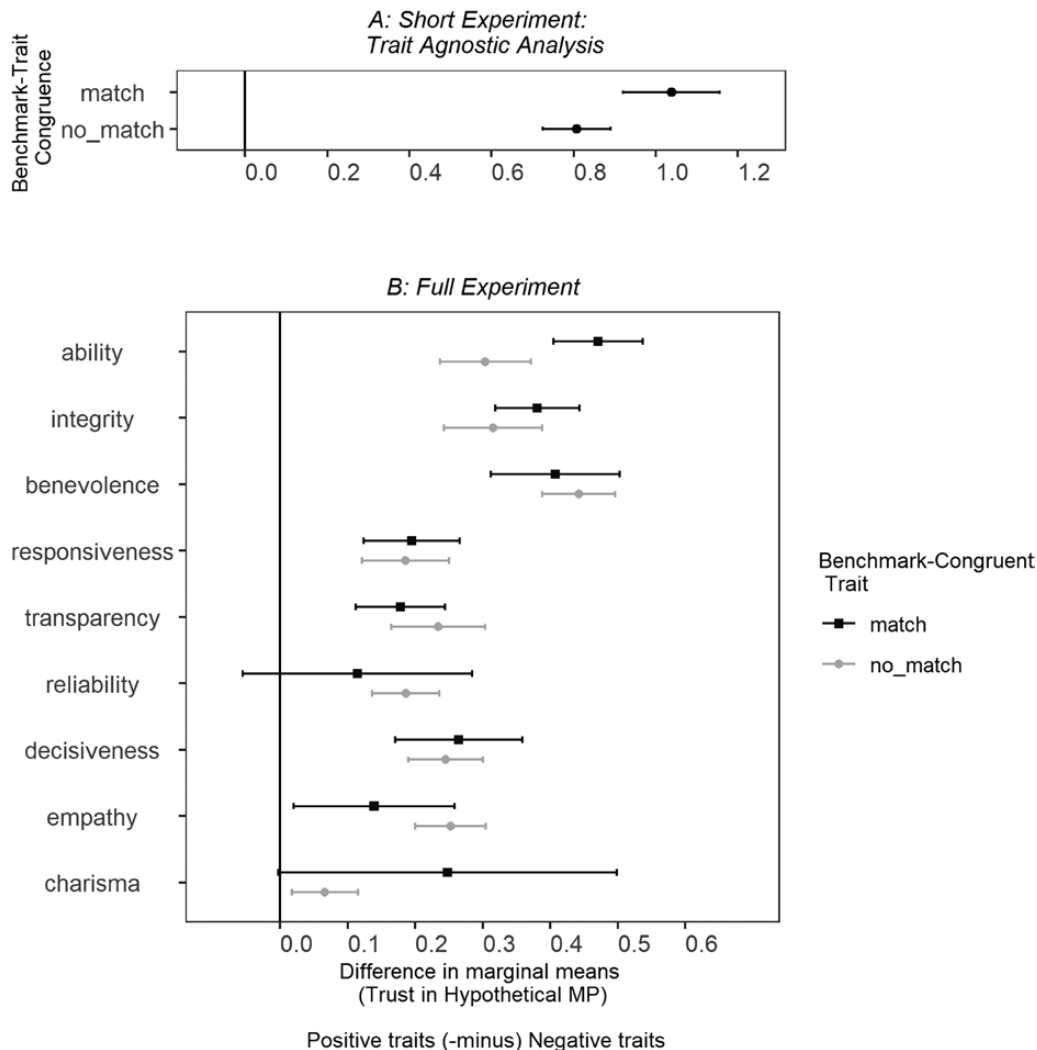


Figure 6. Marginal mean difference between positive and negative traits, by benchmark-consistency.

is consistent with their normative benchmark.<sup>14</sup> Yet, citizens are rarely faced with unidimensional choices. Making a trust judgment often entails considering various criteria simultaneously. In our full experiment, we observe little to no differences in the gap between positive or negative traits across matching and non-matching benchmarks. The sole exception is the ability trait (see [Appendix 1 Figure 5b](#)).

### Robustness

This pattern of null findings also holds in response to various robustness checks. First, using justifications rather than normative benchmarks also yields null findings in both the short experiment, where respondents judged a single trustworthiness trait, and the long experiment where respondents simultaneously considered various traits. Respondents did not place more weight on traits that matched their own justifications to (dis)trust MPs (see [Appendix 1 Table 5A Model 4](#) and [Appendix 1 Table 5C Model 3](#)). Second, even among respondents rating a politician whose traits perfectly align with all three of their normative benchmarks, we do not find evidence for our hypotheses (see [Appendix 2—section 2](#)). Third, our findings are robust against the employment of logistic regression. Fourth, the use of population weights on three respondent traits did not substantially alter our conclusions on the hypothesized effects. Fifth, the adjustment for levels of trust in MPs in wave 1 does not affect our substantive conclusion (see [Appendix 2—section 1](#)). Sixth, normative benchmarks also do not condition evaluations among the higher educated (see [Appendix 2—section 3](#)).

All in all, our main conclusions are robust to a wide range of robustness checks. Normative benchmarks and justifications do not systematically condition the trust as an evaluation effect. Only when respondents are presented with a single unambiguous trait of trustworthiness, the anchoring of these judgments on their benchmarks seems to matter—though not very strongly, consistently, or robustly. More importantly, the real-world information environment is unlikely to reflect such unidimensional evaluations. Faced with a multitude of traits, normative benchmarks apparently lose their relevance. The amount of trust respondents place in a hypothetical politician primarily depends on the traits of the politician and not on the congruence of these traits with citizens' normative benchmarks.

### Conclusion

The dominant approach toward political trust hinges on the assumption that trust is at least in part the outcome of an evaluative process. The trust-as-evaluation model assumes that political trust is ultimately a rather rational evaluation against the normative benchmarks that the truster holds (cf. [Citrin & Stoker, 2018](#), p. 57; [Miller & Listhaug, 1990](#), p. 358). This paper sought to test this widely shared assumption in the political trust literature by asking a simple but fundamental question: “Do citizens form political trust judgments by evaluating political objects against normative benchmarks?”

Our answer to this question challenges the commonly held view of the role that normative benchmarks play in the trust-as-evaluation model. In line with previous research, our two-wave survey experiment reveals direct effects of

politicians' traits on respondents' trust. When presented with a hypothetical politician, respondents place more trust in “trustworthy” actors than untrustworthy ones. Also in line with existing literature, we find (weak) evidence of negativity bias when respondents are asked to simultaneously consider different traits in their trust judgments. In these situations, respondents deduct a disproportionate amount of trust from politicians with few flaws.

But although respondents clearly differentiate trustworthy politicians from untrustworthy ones, their normative benchmarks do not systematically influence this judgment. Generally, respondents did not reward politicians more for behaving according to their pre-specified benchmarks for trustworthiness; neither did they mete out additional punishment to politicians who violated benchmarks they indicated as important to them. Overall, the empirical tests in this paper support the idea that citizens' perceptions of the object's trustworthiness matters but simultaneously cast doubt on the mechanism that citizens anchor these judgment on their normative benchmarks.

This lack of supporting evidence for a dominant assumption in the literature is remarkable. Yet, it is not an artifact created by operationalization and methods. Firstly, the findings are robust against a wide variety of checks. Secondly, although we have developed new items to operationalize traits, the significance of their main effects in expected directions does not lead to any doubts here. Thirdly, our experimental design presented respondents with the low-stakes scenario of a hypothetical politician. It is unlikely that benchmarks play a stronger role in real-life scenarios that are complicated by motivated reasoning and affective (partisan) bias. Fourthly, the experiment varies in multiple conditions, but the consistent and significant direct effects of these conditions strongly suggest that the design was not too complex for respondents. Therefore, we can only conclude that the conditioning role of individuals' normative benchmarks is at best small and inconsistent, and at worst non-significant.

That does not necessarily mean that these benchmarks do not matter for political trust at all. Normative benchmarks need not be stable, but may instead be context-dependent, relevant only to the extent that the political context (peers, media, or party leaders) offer cues about which benchmarks matter in specific circumstances. In this perspective, normative benchmarks would still matter. While normative benchmarks may only become salient on an ad-hoc basis, they can become politically relevant when the political context provides strong cues about their salience ([Hetherington & Husser, 2012](#)). Alternatively, normative benchmarks need not exist *a priori* to trust judgments but may instead be constructed in real-time; emerging in the presence of the object being evaluated and the evaluative context itself (; [Pedroni et al., 2017](#); [Slovic, 1995](#)).

Yet, regardless of whether we conclude that the role of normative benchmarks in this process is small, inconsistent, incidental, or even non-existent, there are serious implications for political trust as a mechanism of democratic accountability. Democratic accountability rests in part on citizens' ability to make retrospective evaluations by weighing performance against their normative and instrumental preferences (e.g., [de Vries & Giger, 2014](#); but see [Achen & Bartels, 2016](#)). However, the lack of supporting evidence for the role of normative benchmarks in the trust evaluation calls for a reflection on the all too cognitive micro-level foundation of our

<sup>14</sup> Although the short experiment does not allow for an accurate estimation of these differences by trait, the gap between positive and negative traits leans wider for most traits (see [Appendix 1 Figure 5A](#)).

conceptual, theoretical, and even normative models of political trust.

Extensive research on motivated reasoning and partisan cues highlights the susceptibility of evaluations to confirmation bias, disconfirmation bias, and prior-attitude effects (Taber & Lodge, 2006). Such motivated reasoning is also likely to apply to trust judgments (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015, p. 78), and challenges the notion that trust attitudes stem from citizens' use of their normative benchmarks in their evaluations. These alternative theories might be the rule. While citizens are generally well able to distinguish trustworthy political actors from untrustworthy ones, their normative benchmarks do not condition these trust evaluations. This sobering conclusion has implications for our understanding of democratic accountability that reach far beyond the field of political trust.

## Data Availability Statement

Data replication sets, R code and [supplementary material](#), to be used solely for the purpose of replication, are available.

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## Conflict of Interests

The author(s) have no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

## Ethics Approval

Approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the University of Amsterdam, Faculty of Social and Behavioral

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## Supplementary Data

Supplementary data are available at *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* online.

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