Political trust represents a key indicator of how closely citizens relate to political actors; trust also has significant effects on citizens’ behaviour in ways that affect the effectiveness of democratic governance. Yet in spite of the profile and importance of the concept, little scholarly attention has been paid to the way political trust should be measured. This would not matter if existing indicators of the concept were valid and reliable. However, this is by no means clear. Most empirical studies of political trust rely on simple – arguably simplistic – ways of measuring the concept, based on indicators whose validity is potentially limited. If scholars are to improve the way they measure political trust, more rigorous and robust indicators should be developed. This article identifies various such measures, drawing on analyses conducted by scholars in the field of organisational studies. However, the task of identifying suitable indicators is complicated and involves potential trade-offs. These must be faced and resolved if new indicators – capable of providing more robust measures of political trust – are to be developed.

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In understanding how citizens relate to political authorities, trust is seen to play a central role. Political trust provides an important indicator of how positively citizens regard decision-making actors and institutions. Trust also shapes how citizens behave in ways that affect the health of democratic governance. Thus, people’s feelings of trust towards government have been found to shape their propensity to pay taxes (Scholz and Lubell, 1998) and to comply with collective obligations (Marien and Hooghe, 2011). Given these effects, it is troubling that levels of trust among citizens in advanced democracies appear to be low and, in many cases, to have declined in recent decades (Dalton, 2004). Yet our grounds for concern are largely based on accepting that the conventional empirical indicators of political trust, based on questions fielded on opinion surveys, provide an accurate way of measuring the concept. In fact, the profile and salience of political trust as a topic has not been matched by considered and careful empirical measurement of the concept. Attempts made up to fifty years ago to develop robust measures of support for the political system (eg. Agger et al, 1961; Finifter, 1970; Craig et al, 1990) have generally not been followed up. While considerable effort has been devoted to devising measures of trust in other fields – most notably in organisational studies (McEvily and Tortoriello, 2011) and risk management (Earle, 2010) – studies of trust in the political sphere have tended to rely, usually uncritically, on a set of primitive and well-worn indicators. However, these indicators suffer from well-known methodological weaknesses, which undermine their ability to serve as robust measurement instruments. There is thus a substantial gap between, on the one hand, the contemporary interest in, and importance attached to, political trust and, on the other hand, the rigour in the way the concept is measured.

The weakness of existing indicators of political trust has been noted by a number of scholars. For example, having identified the propensity of researchers to gauge trust through simple single-item survey questions, Gershtenson and Plane (2011: 132) observe:

“… there is a dearth of serious evaluations of alternative trust measures. Without empirical evidence that one measure is better or worse than others, political science research on trust is likely to remain fragmented, and thereby limited in its ability to truly understand the relationship between political trust and other variables.”

Given the importance of political trust, and its relevance in shaping patterns of citizen behaviour, it is perplexing that scholars have based their research so unquestioningly on a limited and simple set of indicators, and have devoted so little energy to considering whether alternative indicators might do a better job in measuring the concept. This article is intended to provide an initial foray into that task. It begins by considering how political trust has conventionally been assessed, and reviews the main shortcomings of these indicators. It then identifies some basic principles by which political trust might more accurately be measured. This task is, however, far from straightforward and involves various trade-offs depending on the purpose being pursued by the analyst. These different purposes, and the trade-offs they entail, are laid out. At this point, the discussion draws heavily on the measurement of trust within the organisational science literature. I suggest that attention to the work of scholars in this field might help in formulating ways of gauging trust more effectively in the political realm. However, comparing relations in the contexts of the workplace and the political sphere also highlights various differences in the nature, and thus in the measurement, of trust across the two fields. While political scientists can learn
much from the principles underpinning the measurement of trust in the organisational field, not all of these principles are readily transferable to the political field. The analysis concludes by highlighting alternative ways of measuring political trust, and considering how far these constitute an improvement on existing practice.

1. Conventional methods of measuring political trust

Political trust was first measured via a battery of survey questions fielded on the US National Election Study (NES) in 1958 (item 2 from 1964). This battery comprised the following items:

1. How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?
2. Would you say the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves, or that it is run for the benefit of all people?
3. Do you think that the people in government waste a lot of the money we pay in taxes, wastes some of it, or don’t waste very much of it?
4. Do you think that quite a few of the people running the government are a little crooked, not very many are, or do you think hardly any of them are crooked?

These items are still used by the NES to measure trust, albeit that the wording of the fourth item has been altered, with “corrupt” replacing “crooked”. However, although widely taken to measure political trust, the items were originally designed to tap people’s “basic evaluative orientations toward the national government” (Stokes, 1962: 64), and in particular their assessments of officials’ honesty, competence and procedural correctness. There was no justification of the questions’ status as measures of political trust, and indeed no reference to the concept, in Stokes’ (1962) account.

Hence, in spite of the NES items’ longevity, there are doubts over how far the indicators genuinely and accurately tap political trust. Indeed, rather than tapping attitudes towards the political system in general (what is normally assumed by the notion of political trust; Easton, 1975), the NES items have instead been found to tap evaluations of incumbent political actors (Citrin, 1974; Hill, 1981). Moreover, the relationship of the individual indicators to one another has been found to be inconsistent (Poznyak et al, 2014), again highlighting the tenuous relationship between the individual indicators and the background concept.

However, while the NES persists with these measures, their potential flaws are at least well-documented. Far less attention, however, has been paid to the ways in which subsequent measures of political trust have developed. While various surveys outside the US have replicated the NES items (eg. Muller, 1979: 281-2), most national and international surveys have eschewed them, largely in favour of simpler indicators. These indicators tend to manifest three features: they comprise a single item, they explicitly mention trust, and they

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1 A fifth question was initially used to measure political trust, this time gauging whether respondents thought that “the people running the government are smart people who usually know what they are doing … or that quite a few of them don’t seem to know what they are doing?”. However, this question was fielded on the NES only until 1980. See http://www.electionstudies.org/.
contain no referent against which trust is to be gauged. Typically, trust is measured by a single survey item worded along the following lines: “How much do you trust [institution] in [country]?” Given the controversy over the NES items and what they measure, this departure from the multi-item NES model is hardly surprising. Moreover, since single-item measures take up less time within crowded survey schedules than do multi-item measures, this practice frees up survey space which can be used to pose questions on trust about various different political institutions. Yet while researchers now routinely resort to single-item direct indicators to gauge political trust, there is no evidence that this practice provides a more robust form of measurement than the widely criticised NES indicators. In particular, single-item direct indicators may (i) only weakly tap the background concept, (ii) trigger variations in understanding among survey respondents, (iii) fail to capture ambivalence in attitudes among respondents, and (iv) fail to provide a generalised, as opposed to an incumbent-driven, assessment of the political system.

The first concern relates to the notion that trust is a simple concept capable of direct measurement. Single-item survey measures assume a one-to-one correspondence between the indicator and the background concept. This assumption is sometimes made explicit (although more often remains only implicit); for example, Selnes (1998), Metlay (1999) and Lang and Hallman (2005) argue that trust is a unidimensional construct that, moreover, is – as Selnes (1998) argues – directly accessible to survey respondents. Yet even if a concept is found to be unidimensional, this does not entail that it can adequately be measured through a single-item indicator, unless it can be shown that the indicator fully encapsulates the meaning of the concept. Moreover, theoretical and empirical analyses of political trust usually suggest that the concept is not unidimensional, but instead contains various dimensions (relevant studies from the fields of political science, risk management, organisational science and health studies include: Citrin and Muste, 1999; Grimmelikhuijsen and Knies, 2015; Johnson, 1999; McEvily and Tortoriello, 2011; Earle, 2010; Ozawa and Sripad, 2013). If trust does comprise various components or dimensions, it would seem unlikely that any single-item indicator is able to fully capture the concept. Moreover, not only are such indicators unlikely to fully ‘map’ the concept of interest, but their reliability is

2 The International Social Science Programme is an exception in maintaining the NES measure of trust in government with the referent “to do what is right”.
3 For example, the World Values Survey asks about people’s confidence in 18 organisations, while Eurobarometer asks about their trust in nine national organisations plus EU institutions.
4 Hetherington (2005: 51) suggests that “trust in government is a simple concept, about which almost all people will express true attitudes”. However, he provides no evidence to justify this claim.
5 A single-item indicator may be justified if this is held to provide a summary, or ‘global’, measure of a concept. Here, although a concept may be held to comprise various elements or components, a single indicator is capable of capturing the essence of the concept that underlies each of these elements (Fuchs and Diamantopolous, 2009: 200; Petrescu, 2013). Yet among the numerous studies that rely on the conventional single-item indicator of trust, little evidence – or even argument – is produced to justify the indicator on these grounds.
6 When it comes to using trust as an independent variable to explain various outcomes, multi-item indicators of concepts such as social trust have been found to yield a stronger set of relationships than single-item indicators (Zmerli et al, 2007: 46-50), presumably because the former provide a better measure of the concept than the latter.
difficult to assess, while they are also prone to measurement error (Churchill, 1979; Zeller and Carmines, 1980: ch3; deVellis, 1991; Spector, 1992: 4-5; Heath and Martin, 1997).

Many other concepts closely linked to political trust are deemed by scholars to be multi-dimensional in nature and hence capable of measurement only through multiple indicators rather than single ones. This list includes: trust in risk management (Poortinga and Pidgeon, 2003; Allum, 2007) and in the healthcare system (Egede and Ellis, 2008), confidence in the legal system (Gibson et al, 2003; Hamm et al, 2011; Jackson et al, 2011) and the political system (Keller et al, 2013), societal unease (Steenvoorden, 2015), interpersonal trust (Yamagishi and Yamagishi, 1994), dispositional trust (Frazier et al, 2013), political efficacy (Morrell, 2003), political cynicism (Cheng et al, 2012), democratic norms (McClosky and Zaller, 1984), democratic support (Magalhaes, 2014) and system justification (Kay and Jost, 2003; Rutto et al, 2014). Indeed, early efforts to measure concepts like political cynicism (Agger et al, 1961), political alienation (Finifter, 1970) and political trust itself (Craig et al, 1990) employed multi-item measures. The assumption behind these measures is that the concepts are latent rather than being directly observable and, moreover, are multi-dimensional, thus requiring multiple indicators to fully tap their various components. Yet this insight has not been applied – in recent years at least – to the measurement of political trust.

The second concern with the conventional measure of political trust is that survey questions that explicitly reference potentially complex concepts like trust might induce different understandings of the concept among respondents. Studies on interpersonal or social trust have suggested that single-item indicators provide imperfect measures where the meaning of the concept is imprecise or variant (Miller and Mitamura, 2003; Sturgis and Smith, 2010; Bulloch, 2013; Crepaz et al, 2014). We know from qualitative research that complex terms such as ‘democracy’ are interpreted in different ways within and across populations (Canache et al, 2001; Carnaghan, 2010; Schaffer, 2010). Yet one principle in the design of survey questions is that these should be understood in comparable terms across the population (Fowler, 2009: 91-94). Where survey questions are understood and interpreted differently among respondents, we cannot rule out the possibility that any variations in the distribution of responses – between groups or over time – might reflect differences in comprehension and interpretation rather than in substance (Sturgis and Smith, 2010: 89).

Relatively, the third concern with conventional measures is that survey items that squeeze a range of potential evaluations into a single expressed opinion risk understating the level of uncertainty and ambivalence in people’s attitudes. Citizens may judge political actors and institutions in both positive terms (“the government is competent”) and negative terms (“the government is not concerned about people like me”). Qualitative research has suggested that one reason people find it difficult to answer questions about general concepts such as ‘confidence’ or ‘trust’ is because they feel unable to summarise competing – positive and negative – feelings towards an object (Charlton et al, 2011).\footnote{Faced with summarising their opinions on a potentially complex issue like trust in a single general survey measure, many people may avoid careful consideration of the factors or dimensions that underlie the concept – particularly where this may induce ambivalence – and instead resort to a more immediate reaction. This response is likely to reflect people’s general feelings about the object under}
attitudes towards their political institutions have identified widespread ambivalence: between 50 to 70 per cent of Americans have been found to hold attitudes towards Congress, the Supreme Court and the incumbent president that contain both positive and negative feelings (McGraw and Bartels, 2005; also Gainous et al, 2008). Similarly, studies that have examined public ‘scepticism’ towards politicians – by including in their trust scale a mid-point explicitly labelled as an absence of trust or distrust – have found high proportions of citizens aligning themselves at this point (Mishler and Rose, 1997; Cook and Gronke, 2005; also Gainous et al, 2008). Although single-item questions may be accompanied by response scales that include such mid-points to capture the absence of clear views or the presence of conflicting opinions, ambivalent feelings about political actors and institutions are better gauged through multi-item measures that allow participants to respond positively on some components of trust, but negatively on others.

The fourth concern about the use of single-item indicators to measure trust goes back to the debate – now four decades old – over whether these indicators tap a particular or generalised evaluation of the political system. Even where single-item trust measures lack an explicit reference to a particular government, there remain concerns that these indicators tap people’s feelings about incumbent political actors more than their feelings about the operation of the political system. In the case of attitudes to the US Supreme Court, for example, it has been shown that single-item measures of ‘confidence’ tap people’s feelings about the institution’s performance rather than its broader standing or legitimacy (Gibson et al, 2003). Moreover, in a study of US citizens’ attitudes towards Congress, it was found that measuring congressional approval in a single-item form (“Do you approve or disapprove of the way the US Congress has been handling its job?”) attracted a stronger influence from evaluations of the incumbent president than did multi-item measures of congressional approval that tapped the various dimensions of legislative support (Mondak et al, 2007: 41). Hence, single-item questions on attitudes towards a specific institution risk tapping judgements that are contaminated by people’s feelings towards the incumbent personnel. Multi-item measures that direct respondents towards the specific aspects or dimensions of a concept appear less prone to such incumbency contamination.

It is clear from the earlier discussion that the NES indicators provide a contentious, and arguably flawed, way of measuring political trust. It is not clear, however, that the way in which most other surveys assess trust provides a more robust gauge of the concept. Yet, while the NES indicators have attracted numerous criticisms, fewer critical lenses have been trained on the single-item indicators of trust that are routinely used on national and international surveys. However, these single-item indicators arguably provide an imperfect review rather than more considered evaluations of the object’s features and properties. Singular trust questions may thus encourage ‘schematic’ responses, based on general feelings and impressions, rather than ‘piecemeal’ responses, based on consideration of particular positive and negative assessments (the distinction between ‘schematic’ and ‘piecemeal’ reasoning is made by Fiske [1986; also Fiske and Neuberg, 1990]). Hence, general single-item survey measures of trust questions risk picking up superficial or routine feelings, while more specific questions are more likely to attract considered judgements (Citrin, 1977: 384). In addition, since contemporary social discourse continually informs us that people in authority are not to be trusted, the very mention of the word ‘trust’ in the question might exert a negative priming effect, which would also serve to skew responses.
way of measuring the concept of trust, since they potentially fail to capture its full and multi-dimensional nature, establish no clear and invariant meaning across respondents, restrict the ability to capture attitude ambivalence, and attract incumbent-based evaluations rather than evaluations of the wider political system. These concerns are serious ones, and behove researchers to think carefully about developing alternative, and more robust, measurement instruments. Before I turn to this, however, I should at least consider the potential virtues of the single-item measure of political trust.

The first of these advantages is that trust has often been asked about in consistent ways for long periods of time and across different countries, facilitating longitudinal and comparative analysis. The second advantage is that the trust question is simple and short. It takes up little space within the confines of the typical opinion survey, thereby also allowing researchers to ask respondents about their trust in many different political institutions (as noted earlier, up to 18 institutions on the *World Values Survey*). A third advantage is that the wording of the question (“How much do you trust [institution] in [country]?”) is neutral, since it does not specify the grounds on which trust might be granted or withheld. Hence, there is no question of conflating the measurement of the concept with its potential causes.

These advantages are neither groundless nor insignificant. Yet neither do they represent strong arguments for limiting the way we measure political trust to the conventional indicators. If, for reasons of replicability and comparability, researchers wish to retain single-item indicators of trust, there is no reason why they cannot do so. Surveys could be designed to accommodate both the traditional indicator of trust and any new indicators designed to provide more robust measurement of the concept. When it comes to space considerations, the merits of being able to measure trust across a range of institutions may be more apparent than real. Analysts have consistently shown that expressions of trust in different institutions reflect a consistent or common underlying attitude rather than discrete attitudes (Abramson and Finifter, 1981; Feldman, 1983; Hooghe, 2011; Marien, 2011; Dekker, 2011; Rose, 2014). Given this, it is not fatal if single-item measures are replaced with multi-

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8 In addition to these concerns, there are other potential flaws with the indicators typically used to measure political trust. For example, response options that force survey respondents to assess whether they trust an institution “almost always”, “most of the time”, “only some of the time” or “almost never” may provide a misleading way of categorising levels of trust. Numerical response scales may be an improvement on categorical response options, but unless these explicitly distinguish between ‘trust’ and ‘distrust’ in an institution, they potentially over-inflate the distribution of critical attitudes among the population (Cook and Gronke, 2005; Gershtenson and Plane, 2011). However, while these are important concerns, any inadequacies in the response options offered on survey items are easily remedied; the more fundamental issue is surely to design more valid measures of the concept.

9 I should acknowledge that many researchers who draw on existing survey measures of political trust are well aware of their potential weaknesses, but rely on them nonetheless since they often represent the only available source of data. By contrast, researchers measuring social trust are in the fortunate position of being able to draw on behavioural measures of the concept alongside attitudinal measures.

10 If there are different types of institutional trust, these reflect distinctions in judgements between ‘representative’ bodies (governments, parliaments, politicians, political parties and civil servants) and ‘implementation’ bodies (courts, the judiciary, the police and the army) (Rothstein and Stolle, 2008).
item measures, even if the latter consume more survey space and thus preclude asking about trust in a variety of different institutions. The final advantage of the conventional measure of political trust – its neutrality or absence of referent – is potentially more serious, and is thus considered in more detail in the next section.

In short, while the traditional measures of trust have various weaknesses, their virtues are relatively limited. This is not to say that the practice of measuring trust via single-item questions should be discontinued. Instead, we should recognise that these indicators might provide only a partial way of measuring the concept. Researchers concerned to understand the relations between citizens and political authorities should think seriously about devising alternative or complementary indicators that might do a better job of measuring political trust.

2. Towards alternative measures of political trust

The starting point for any measurement of political trust must be a clear and precise definition of the concept. Many scholars argue that, when it comes to trust, conceptual clarity and unity remain elusive (Bauer, 2014). However, the conceptual nature of trust has at least been extensively explored; in comparison, its measurement has been neglected. In order to pass over conceptual matters with a view to addressing measurement issues, I simply take as a definition a widely-cited version from the organisational science literature, in which trust consists of:

“the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party” (Mayer et al, 1995: 712)

This definition suggests that the trust of person A in another person or organisation B rests on a judgement by A about how far B will act in a way consistent with their (A’s) interests. This judgement is likely to rest on such features as B’s perceived competence, their concern with A’s interests, and their reliability (Mayer et al, 1995; McKnight and Cervany, 1996; Johnson, 1999; Metlay, 1999; Citrin and Muste, 1999; Levi and Stoker, 2000). Identification of these features suggest that trust is a multi-dimensional concept; that to trust rests on judgements about a number of different considerations, rather than comprising a singular, generalised evaluation. If trust is indeed multi-dimensional, measurement of the concept would ideally proceed by systematic and exhaustive identification of the concept’s components, followed by the design of empirical indicators to cover each enumerated feature of the concept, and finally empirical testing of the indicators to establish their validity and reliability (Hox, 1997). These methodological principles have been followed by many researchers concerned to develop measures of trust in the field of organisational studies (see McEvily and Tortoriello, 2011).

However, measuring trust in terms of its core dimensions risks blurring the distinction between the elements of the concept and its causes or antecedents (Craig, 1993: 8-9, 24-25; Owen and Dennis, 2001). For example, competence or ability might be taken as one of trust’s central components, and thus included among the empirical measures of the concept. Yet the reasons that A has to trust or distrust B might also reflect A’s assessment of B’s
competence. In other words, in measuring a concept through its core dimensions, we risk conflating the concept’s nature with its causes. The potential for measures of trust to overlap with the concept’s potential antecedents has recently been demonstrated by Hooghe (2011). Drawing on data collected in Britain and using factor analytic techniques, he shows that survey indicators designed to tap expressions of trust in fact load strongly onto the same attitudinal dimensions as indicators designed to tap the determinants of trust, suggesting that definitional and causal indicators are not easily separable.

The potential for conflating the nature and causes of a concept is not a serious problem if the analyst’s goal is merely to measure a concept (as is the case with, for example, the recently devised ‘citizen trust in government organizations’ scale’; Grimmelikhuijsen and Kries, 2015). Since there is no attempt to identify causal relations, measurement and explanation are kept distinct. But where the analyst wishes not only to measure a concept but also to account for its incidence, the risk arises of conflating measurement and explanation. The overlap between the two becomes particularly troublesome where the measured components of a concept also appear within the list of its potential determinants. To avoid analysis that descends into tautology, the factors taken to be causal of a concept must be kept separate to the factors treated as definitional.

One way of avoiding undue overlap between the definition and the causes of trust would be to measure the concept in behavioural form, rather than in its more conventional attitudinal guise. Here, trust would consist not in the beliefs that someone has, but in the way they behave, in particular in their interactions with others. Trust as a behaviour is separate to the particular reasons someone might hold for trusting or distrusting another person or organisation. Moreover, some scholars have suggested that ‘manifested’ (behavioural) trust provides a more accurate measure of the concept than ‘stated’ (attitudinal) trust, since people’s engagement with others reveals a trust that in attitudinal form is often disclaimed (O’Neill, 2002). Empirical studies of interpersonal trust corroborate this argument, by showing that behavioural and attitudinal expressions of trust covary only weakly (Ermisch et al, 2009). There are, then, some advantages in seeking to measure trust as a behaviour. However, in practical terms, it is difficult to identify patterns of behaviour that could be taken to proxy political trust. Among the ways that citizens interact with political authorities, some (eg. electoral participation) have only a weak conceptual and empirical relationship with political trust (Cox, 2003; Franklin, 2004: 145-46), while others (eg. compliance with collective obligations) are better considered as the consequences of trust rather than as its manifestation (Marien and Hooghe, 2011).

Aside from its behavioural form, trust also arises – and might be measured – in the form of a decision. In this guise, trust represents an intention on the part of A to rely on, or submit to, another agent, B. Trust as an intention thus sits somewhere between trust as a belief and trust as a behaviour (for the distinction between trust as a behaviour, an intention or a belief, see Dietz and Den Hartog, 2006; McEvily and Tortoriello, 2011). Manifested as an intention to act, political trust maintains a conceptual distinction with its putative causes, while also

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11 This conflation can be seen in the tendency among some studies of trust in the field of risk management to treat factors such as competence and concern as definitional of trust (eg. Earle, 2010), while other studies treat them as its determinants (eg. Frewer et al, 1996; Johnson, 2010).
being more amenable to measurement than in its behavioural guise. Within the organisational science literature, trust is sometimes measured as an intention to act, in the form of a willingness to submit to another actor. This notion of willing submission makes sense in the context of the workplace, since a worker can often choose whether to make herself vulnerable to the actions of a manager (for example by volunteering for an assignment). However, voluntary submission to an agent is less intuitive in the political realm where citizens typically have little choice over whether or not to be vulnerable to a political elite. Yet even if political relations do not involve the notion of willing vulnerability, trust within those relations might still be measured in terms of A’s acceptance of B’s right to make and enforce decisions. In the field of politics, then, the intention to trust might be measured through indicators that tap whether people accept the role of leaders in making binding rules.

To measure political trust as a decision or intention to submit to the rule of politicians, one could draw on the items designed to tap organisational trust developed by authors such as Mayer and Davis (1999) and Gillespie (2012). Adapting these items so that they apply to political actors rather than to organisational ones yields indicators (couched in the form of agree-disagree statements) such as:

“We should let politicians get on with things.”
“Politicians usually take the right decisions without us keeping a close eye on them.”
“I am happy to let politicians take major policy decisions that affect me.”
“I would rather let politicians take big decisions that affect the country than leave things to citizens.”
“We can rely on politicians to do the right thing.”
“The less influence politicians have over our lives the better.” (responses reverse coded)

These items are, individually and collectively, designed to capture citizens’ willingness to submit to the jurisdiction of politicians, and hence to tap the intention to trust. Yet one may wonder how robustly such indicators capture the specific concept of trust, as opposed to a related concept such as acquiescence or legitimacy. Researchers are normally more comfortable in assessing trust via beliefs or judgements on A’s part that B manifests particular features or qualities that induce trust (or distrust) in A. There is no ability to identify the core elements of trust in measures that simply tap A’s willingness to be vulnerable to B. Hence, in spite of the definition of trust identified earlier – a definition that is widely cited across disciplines and which centres on the notion of willing vulnerability – most studies within the field of organisational studies continue to measure trust in the form of a belief rather than as an intention or behaviour (Dietz and Den Hartog, 2006).

If trust is measured as a belief, however, there needs to be a clear separation between its components and its potential causes. This point is emphasised by Dietz and Den Hartog (2006), who distinguish between the content of a trust belief and the source of that belief. The content of a trust belief relates to A’s judgement that B possesses the qualities that render them worthy of trust. In other words, trust beliefs comprise evaluations of A’s

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12 The choice available to citizens concerns the composition of their political rulers (who represents them), rather than on whether to have rulers at all (whether they should be represented).
trustworthiness which, in turn, are usually seen to have various components (such as ability, benevolence and reliability). The source of those trust beliefs relate to the reasons A has for believing that B manifests these qualities. The content and the sources of trust are thus distinctive, and must be kept so. If the analyst’s only concern is to measure trust, this can be achieved by reference to the relevant qualities of B. Yet what if the analyst also wishes to explain the feelings of trust or distrust that A has for B? According to Dietz and Den Hartog (2006), the antecedents of that trust lie in three places: (a) the characteristics of A, notably their propensity to trust; (b) the characteristics or past behaviour of B, notably the extent to which these reveal trustworthy qualities; and (c) the context in which B operates, notably whether they are faced with appropriate incentives and sanctions.

If the antecedents of trust are taken to reside in the nature of the trustor, A, this avoids any conflation between the definition of trust and its causes, since A’s propensity to trust is independent of the way trust is defined and measured. Yet while social or interpersonal forms of trust are frequently explained by reference to an individual’s disposition (Rotter, 1967; Yamagishi and Yamagishi, 1994; Uslaner, 2002), it is less likely that A’s trust in a political agent or institution will depend on such personality features. Individual characteristics do not appear a very promising source for understanding why citizens trust or distrust political actors. Yet seeking explanations for trust in the features or past behaviour of those actors is also fraught. Accounting for trust by reference to the actions of a trustee risks conflating the definition and antecedents of the concept, rather than distinguishing them. If the content of A’s trust in B reflects a perception that B is competent, we cannot then account for A’s trust by reference to previous manifestations of B’s competence. To do so would intertwine the content and the sources of the trust belief.

The separation between the definition (or content) and cause (or source) of trust is upheld more stringently if trust is explained by reference to Dietz and Den Hartog’s (2006) third feature, namely the context in which the trustee, B, operates. Here, trust or distrust is stimulated by observing whether B faces the type of incentives and constraints likely to induce acting in A’s interests (for the role of the institutional environment in shaping the development of trust, see also Bachmann, 2011). Empirical measures capturing these incentives and constraints have been developed in the field of e-commerce by McKnight et al (2002). These gauge whether people feel able to trust online vendors by virtue of the ‘structural conditions’ or features of the internet that determine the safety of online commerce. In the field of political relations, the relevant contextual features or structural conditions might include the presence of appropriate regulations, behavioural norms, performance targets and redress procedures. Thus, while trust might be measured by reference to whether B is deemed to possess trustworthy qualities (competence, concern,

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13 While studies have shown that levels of political trust do covary with certain personality traits (Mondak and Halperin, 2008), it is generally implausible to suggest that any randomly selected individual is likely to trust or distrust a political actor based solely on their personal characteristics.

14 Levels of political trust often fluctuate sharply, suggesting that (stable) personality factors do not play a significant causal role. In addition, if personality factors were important, one would expect to see major variations in levels of political trust between different demographic groups within the population; most empirical analyses, however, find only limited variation in political trust between such groups.
integrity etc), the explanation of that trust would refer to the conditions facing B and whether these are likely to induce B to act competently, responsively and with integrity. In the Appendix, I set out some examples of indicators that might be used to measure both trust and its potential causes. The indicators of trust (the trustworthiness of B; column II) are designed to align with the various dimensions or components that are usually held to define the concept (column I). The indicators tapping the potential causes of trust (column III) relate to the context in which B is located, and whether this context is judged likely to induce B to act in a trustworthy manner.

By identifying the potential causes of trust in the context within which actors are located, we maintain a distinction between the content of a trust belief and its sources. Yet this distinction assumes that the average citizen is both aware of the context in which political actors operate, and competent to assess whether or not these are likely to induce trustworthy behaviour. Given the widespread evidence of citizen ignorance about the design and operation of contemporary political systems (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996), this assumption is questionable. Qualitative studies probing the basis of people’s trust judgements suggest that expressions of ‘trust’ often reflect generalised impressions of a political actor, rather than any detailed information about that figure, their goals or the incentives they face (Carnaghan, 2011; Dekker, 2011). Thus, people may be capable of expressing trust in a particular actor or institution, but potentially less equipped to identify the grounds on which that assessment is based. Any survey measures designed to elicit evaluations of trustworthiness must take account of this potential constraint.

3. Measuring political trust: trade-offs and recommendations

The preceding text highlights the various dilemmas facing any analyst wishing to measure levels of political trust among a population. They can continue the conventional practice of gauging political trust through the use of single-item survey questions that explicitly reference the concept in their wording. However, there are real concerns over whether such indicators accurately and precisely capture the background concept. Yet once we consider alternative ways in which trust might be measured, we are quickly confronted by other problems and trade-offs. Given these, what should be done?

The least disruptive step would be to tweak the existing measure of political trust. If researchers wish to retain the single-item, direct measure of trust, they should at least consider amending the response options, so that scales are anchored by explicit ‘trust’ and ‘distrust’ labels, while also containing an explicit mid-point to allow for the expression of uncertainty or ambivalence (Mishler and Rose, 1997; Cook and Gronke, 2005). The explicit anchoring of response options is likely to induce respondents to more closely consider their judgements and, by distinguishing people who are genuinely distrusting from people who are simply sceptical, to potentially generate a more discriminating measure of political trust.

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15 A recent analysis of survey items fielded on a population sample in Britain showed that items capturing trust in political actors are empirically distinct from items capturing judgements about whether the political system is likely or not to identify and punish incidents of wrongdoing by public officials (Rose, 2014: 34-44). In other words, the content of the trust belief remained separate from its potential source.
Researchers might also wish to consider different formulations of the trust question, to make clearer the area or domain over which trust is being extended (Levi and Stoker, 2000: 498-500; Bauer, 2014). At present, many indicators of trust follow a generic, non-specific formulation: “How much do you trust [institution] in [country]?”. This formulation fails to provide any particular area over which trust is to be evaluated, and thus runs the risk both of respondent incomprehension and response heterogeneity. This could be remedied by specifying the domain of trust, which would clarify for respondents the grounds on which the particular object is being evaluated.16

Yet while these additions would help scholars to distinguish more clearly between conditions of trust, distrust and uncertainty or ambivalence, these are only minor steps in the direction of more accurate conceptual measurement. If trust is seen to comprise more than just a simple and singular assessment of a political agent, attention must be given to its core nature and/or dimensions. Conceptually, the nature of trust may be held to reside in a willingness to accept vulnerability to another’s actions. In this case, trust might be measured through the way a person behaves or intends to behave. Yet when it comes to the former, one runs up against the difficulty in identifying relevant behavioural indicators. Unlike in settings such as the workplace, the realm of politics provides few examples of citizen behaviour that could meaningfully be taken to comprise trust. While social trust can be measured in behavioural form – by observing the reciprocal exchanges between individuals (eg. Glaeser et al, 2000) – many political exchanges lack an element of choice and so reveal little or nothing about trust. Thus, for example, actions such as complying with the law or visiting a doctor’s surgery tell us little about an underlying relationship of trust if citizens in modern democracies are obliged to follow legal rules or to consult a particular medical practice.

More realistically, political trust could be seen as manifested as an intention to act in a trusting manner, defined in the case of political relations as a willingness to rely or depend on a political agent. Even though a citizen may, in practice, have little choice over their reliance on the agent, treating trust as an intention enables us to gauge how far citizens accept their dependence. If political trust is held to be accurately and fully captured by the notion of willing dependence, the empirical task then consists of adding to the example indicators listed above, and testing to see how far these items correlate with one another, with a view to forming a single, multi-item scalar measure of (intentional) trust.17 In effect, the task is to develop an intention-to-trust scale for the political realm analogous to those developed for the workplace (Mayer and Davis, 1999; Gillespie, 2012)

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16 While identifying the grounds or domains on which trust is being extended would improve conceptual measurement, it would of course run up against the problem of potentially conflating the nature and causes of trust. For example, it would be tautological to measure people’s trust in an actor to ‘tell the truth’, while also assessing whether perceptions of honesty and openness explain such trust.

17 There is a further task of exploring how far trust (as intention) is predicted by the kind of indicators of trustworthiness listed in the Appendix (column II). But this is a task of explanation, not of measurement.
If political trust is deemed to be measured most accurately through indicators that tap its various components or dimensions, the only route is to treat trust as a belief rather than as an action or an intention to act. If this route is followed, the empirical analyst must take care to distinguish the indicators held to capture the meaning of trust from those held to capture the reasons for that trust. If the indicators of trust tap the sense of the trustor (A) of how likely the trustee (B) is to act in their interests, the indicators held to tap the causes of that trust must measure a distinctive set of judgements, relating to the conditions in which B operates and whether these conditions are likely to induce responsive behaviour or not. If this route to measuring trust is followed, the empirical endeavour becomes somewhat complicated. First, indicators tapping both the core elements of trust and the judgements about the contextual conditions must be identified (indicative items are set out in the Appendix, columns II and III). The relationship of the indicators of trust (column II) to the concept’s conceptual dimensions (column I) must then be established. Following this, the putative antecedents of trust (column III) must be related to the indicators of trust (column II). Ideally, we would find that research participants experienced little cognitive difficulty in understanding and assessing these contextual conditions. We should also find that those conditions relate most strongly to the indicators and dimensions of trust to which they are conceptually linked (in other words, we should find horizontal linkages between the dimensions, measures and conditions of trust listed in the Appendix).

4. Conclusion

In analysing political trust, most scholarly effort to date has been devoted to the twin issues of its causes and its consequences. Given their relevance, it is understandable that these issues have been pursued at the expense of the similarly important, though perhaps rather less exciting, issue of how best to measure trust. As a result, political scientists have fallen back, often without much if any critical comment, on well-worn methods of measurement. This has usually involved couching survey measures in ways that explicitly reference the concept and that are applied in a single-question format to particular political institutions. The use of single-item indicators to tap trust is not unique to political scientists, but is also prevalent in the fields of risk management and organisational studies (Chryssochoidis et al, 2009: 149-53; Earle, 2010: 553, 562; McEvily and Tortoriello, 2011: 33). However, empirical researchers in these fields have at least paid greater attention to alternative ways in which trust might be measured, and such exercises have important lessons for researchers dealing with trust in the field of politics.

The preceding discussion makes clear that there is no single ideal way of measuring a complex concept like political trust. Instead, there are various ways in which trust might be identified and assessed. None of these is either wholly satisfactory or wholly suitable for the different tasks that empirical researchers might have. The main message of this review is to urge scholars to think more carefully about how they measure political trust, and to relate their choices to their particular research purpose. Rather than uncritically replicating existing ways of measuring trust, researchers should consider if alternative indicators might yield stronger measures of the concept. Fairly minor adjustments to existing measures can be made by introducing new response options to survey items. Yet if existing survey indicators are felt to provide an inadequate way of measuring trust, amending their wording or format is unlikely to significantly strengthen their capability. Instead, analysts might need
to think about more radical changes to the way they measure trust. This could involve conceptualising and measuring trust in behavioural or intentional forms. Alternatively, it could involve a continued focus on trust as a belief, but measured through indicators designed to fully capture the concept and its core components. These latter steps would clearly involve much additional research effort. They would also upset the link with the way in which political trust has conventionally been measured, going back five decades. Yet what is sacrificed in continuity might be more than gained in more accurate and effective measurement of a concept that most agree is central to the relations between citizens and political actors.
## Appendix A: Indicative measures of trust and of conditions leading to trustworthiness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I: DIMENSION OF TRUST</th>
<th>II: MEASURES OF TRUST</th>
<th>III: CONDITIONS INDUCING TRUSTWORTHINESS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>Generally speaking, politicians are competent</td>
<td>In politics, only the most able people get to the top</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>Political parties ensure that only capable people get selected as election candidates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inefficiency</td>
<td>Governments waste a lot of public money</td>
<td>There is not enough scrutiny over how ministers spend public funds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expertise</td>
<td>Politicians generally know what they are doing</td>
<td>Once elected, politicians are given a good training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern; benevolence</td>
<td>Politicians usually try to help their constituents</td>
<td>Only politicians who can show they are responding to people’s concerns win elections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Politicians tend to look after their own interests rather than trying to help others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>In the main, politicians don’t really understand the problems facing ordinary people</td>
<td>The average politician is very like the average citizen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>In the main, politicians tell the truth</td>
<td>If politicians don’t tell the truth, they are likely to get caught out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honesty; truthfulness</td>
<td>Government ministers tell us as little about what they get up to as they can</td>
<td>There are clear rules about what politicians must disclose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>Governments distort the facts to make their policies look good</td>
<td>There is not enough factual information available to citizens to allow them to judge government decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In the main, when things go wrong politicians admit their mistakes</td>
<td>Politicians who admit to mistakes tend to get punished by voters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>Politicians are happy to promise things at an election but forget their promises afterwards</td>
<td>If politicians go back on promises made to voters, they get punished at elections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promise-keeping</td>
<td>Politicians try to keep their promises</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistency</td>
<td>Politicians change their minds all the time</td>
<td>Politicians must respond to voters; if voters change their minds, so must politicians.</td>
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<td>-----------------------------</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Fairness**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Equity</th>
<th>Governments treat each group within society equally</th>
<th>Governments that favour some social groups over others will not last in office for long</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>


