

# **BASIC DEMOCRATIC TRUST**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Processes of polarization induce political adversaries to fear the worst of each other: electoral fraud, abuse of power, political violence, the corruption of justice ... In the comparative study of democracy, we have no vocabulary to describe such threat perceptions. To fill the conceptual void, I introduce the notion of “basic democratic trust” and its opposite: fear of democratic enemies (“enemyopia”).

The former denotes the confidence that political actors have in the democratic reliability of their political adversaries as well as public officials, the latter their conviction that others are willing to subvert democracy. To carve out the concept, I map the domains of political trust along two dimensions - procedures (democratic norms) and substance (policy decisions) - and clarify its twin opposites - distrust (within cooperative relations) and “enemyopia” (within hostile relations).

This conceptual map allows us to resolve the longstanding “paradox” that democracy needs both trust and distrust. Outside the domain of democratic ground rules, the role of trust is contingent; within, its dissolution threatens to dissolve the very bounds of democracy.

## **KEYWORDS**

trust, distrust, democracy, democratic norms, democratic compliance

## INTRODUCTION

When Donald Trump became, first, a candidate, and then president, a wave of anxiety swept over the liberal community who saw him as a “clear and present danger” to democracy.<sup>1</sup> Yet, during his entire presidency, he himself denounced an incessant stream of antidemocratic attacks by “radical Democrats”, “the fake media”, and “the deep State.”<sup>2</sup> His complaints about the subversion of democracy by his adversaries culminated in his campaign against “massive and unprecedented fraud” in the 2020 election<sup>3</sup> and the storming of Capitol Hill by his supporters to “stop the steal” and “save the Republic.”<sup>4</sup>

Something broke when Trump came to power (within the Democratic camp), and something was destroyed over the course of his presidency (within the Republican camp). I propose to call this undefined *something* “basic democratic trust.” The concept denotes the confidence that political actors have in the democratic reliability of others - their political adversaries as well as public agents (like judges, police officers, and elections officials). In the presence of such trust, political actors recognize their competitors as trustworthy adversaries who adhere to the basic norms of democratic competition. In its absence, they view each other as amoral enemies who are capable of anything - including electoral fraud, the corruption of justice, and political violence.

The irruption of Donald Trump onto the center stage of U.S. politics added plausibility and dramatism to the overlapping debates on “pernicious polarization” (McCoy and Somer 2019) and “the global crisis of democracy” (Diamond 2019) that predated it. The concept of “basic democratic trust” that I am introducing here permits us to clarify the underlying dynamics. In self-reinforcing processes of political polarization and democratic crises, political conflict turns into an existential battle between antagonistic camps. Each side comes to view the other as “an enemy to be vanquished” rather than “a normal political adversary with whom to engage in a competition for power” (McCoy, Rahman, Somer 2018: 19). Yet, do such destabilizing political conflicts escalate because contending actors hate each other or because they fear each other? And if it is fear that drives their confrontation, do they fear material losses and moral injuries (substantive damage)? Or do they fear the subversion of their rights and liberties

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<sup>1</sup> Among many others, see Cruz and Buser (2016), Connolly (2017), Galston (2018), Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), Klaas (2017), Mounk (2018), Sunstein (2018), and Snyder (2017).

<sup>2</sup> For a systematic analysis of his accusations, see Schedler (2023).

<sup>3</sup> Twitter message @realdonaldtrump (21 November 2020, 8:13:32 AM EST). Rutenberg et al. (2021) offer a summary of his post-electoral campaign against the 2020 election results.

<sup>4</sup> For a portrait of some protagonists and their grievances during the events of 6 January 2021, see Barry, McIntire, and Rosenberg (2021).

(democratic damage)?<sup>5</sup> The notion of “basic democratic trust” permits us to capture the latter.

Carving out a systematic conceptual space for shared expectations of democratic fair play (“basic democratic trust”) is meant to clarify current debates on democratic crisis. In addition, it permits us to resolve “the paradox of democracy and trust” (Lenard 2012: L 1431) – the perplexing ambiguity that has haunted theoretical debates on the role of trust in democracy. For some theorists (in the republican tradition), representative democracy is grounded in trust; for others (in the liberal tradition), it is grounded in distrust.<sup>6</sup> Given the tenacity of the debate, it is unlikely that this ambiguity can be eliminated. But it can be clarified. As I contend, though, such clarification requires clarifying the domains of democratic trust.

Conventional treatments of political trust focus on the actors involved: who trusts whom? They pay scant attention to the domains of trust: who trusts whom to do, or not to do, what? In this paper, I strive to remedy this analytic neglect. After outlining the ambiguous role of trust in democracy, I map the domains of trust along two fundamental dimensions of democratic politics: procedures (democratic norms) and substance (policy decisions). Both comprise a broad range of issues of varying relevance, from trivial to existential. The notion of “basic democratic trust” refers to fundamental matters of democratic procedure. I explicate its “basic” nature in three regards – its domain, its depth, and its democratic role – and describe the democratic role that all other forms of political trust play as contingent. To understand the democratic consequences that the destruction of basic democratic trust carries, I further argue, we need to understand its extreme opposite, which is not distrust but “enemyopia,” the perception of others as democratic enemies.

## THE DEMOCRATIC AMBIGUITY OF TRUST

Students of politics have treated the democratic role of trust in an “ambivalent” (Warren 1999: 311), often even bipolar, manner. On the one hand, it is commonplace to affirm that democracy requires trust, that “[it] cannot exist without trust” (Krastev 2013: L 754) as an essential societal resource for “making democracy work” (Putnam 1994).<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, it is no less commonsensical

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<sup>5</sup> For a review of the comparative literature on polarization and its conflicting accounts of the sources of interparty conflict, see Schedler (2022).

<sup>6</sup> Among many others, see Bruno (2017), Lenard (2008 and 2012: Ch.3), Sztompka (2010), and Warren (1999).

<sup>7</sup> Cleary and Stokes (2009: 308) and Newton (2007: 342) give one-page summaries. See also Lenard (2012) and van der Meer and Zmerli (2017).

to maintain that modern democracy involves the “organization” or “institutionalization of distrust” (Krastev 2013, Braithwaite 1998) and demands, not trust, but the “healthy skepticism of citizens [as] a prerequisite” (Levi 1998: 96).<sup>8</sup> The emphasis on trust and civic virtues is familiar within the republican tradition of political thought; the emphasis on distrust and institutional constraints within the liberal tradition (see also Hardin 2013, Sztompka 2010). As these divergent perspectives suggest, the “relationship between democracy and trust is complex” (Warren 2017: 50). Most likely both stances are right and “[d]emocracy needs both trust and distrust” (Sztompka 2010: 290) as complementary rather than competing attitudes (Bruno 2017). But how exactly so? To answer this question, we need to take a step back and ask: what does it mean to trust?

Trust and distrust are assessments of the risks of social cooperation; they are judgments on the reliability of others on whom we depend.<sup>9</sup> They respond to the inescapable need of cooperating humans to deal with their mutual freedom, which includes the freedom to betray their commitments, do harm, lie, and break promises. The literature on trust and distrust revolves around concepts like social risk, vulnerability, threat, danger, discretion, contingency, and indeterminacy.<sup>10</sup> They all refer to the twin constitutive conditions of trust and distrust: social dependency and uncertainty. We need others whose behavior we do not control; they are free to act in one way or the other, either aiding or harming us. Trusting them means judging them to be *dependable*, which allows us to relax and dismiss the risks of cooperating with them. Distrusting them means judging them to be *unreliable*, which obliges us to stay alert and anticipate the damage they may cause us. The people we trust are sources of tranquility; those we distrust are sources of anxiety.

Our judgments on the reliability of others are never without bounds, though, but are always limited to certain matters. When we trust someone, we trust her to do certain things but not others (see Hardin 2002: 9-10). We may trust a friend to help us in financial need but not to cure our ailments. Trust is neither an individual attitude nor a bilateral sentiment but a “a three-part relation” (Hardin 2002: 8): A trusts B to do  $\delta$ . While the idea of “generalized distrust” is entirely coherent, the common notion of “generalized trust” is not (if taken literally). We may hold some people not to be trustworthy at all, not even in small matters. Yet, when we trust

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<sup>8</sup> On the “established tradition of democratic distrust” (Maloy 2009: 494), see also Braithwaite (1998), Hardin (2013), Cleary and Stokes (2009), and Rosanvallon (2008).

<sup>9</sup> For similar definitions, see Baier (1986: 235), Hawley (2012: Ch. 1), Lenard (2012: Ch. 1), Levi and Stoker (2000: 476), Sztompka (1999: 11-14), and Warren (2017: 33).

<sup>10</sup> For many others, see Blajer (2019), Ermisch et al. (2009: 751), Giddens (1990), Hamill and Gambetta (2006), Offe (1999: 47-49), Hardin (2002: 11-12), Pettit (1998: 298), Sztompka (1999: 29-40), and Warren (1999: 312-313).

someone, we trust them within certain domains or spheres of action. We do not trust anybody with regard to everything (see also Baier 1986: 236-237).<sup>11</sup>

Now, what are the domains of trust and distrust in liberal democracy? Which are the matters that require trust among democratic actors, and which are those that permit, or even demand, doubt and suspicion among them? Surprisingly, the scholarly debate on trust and democracy has left us without clear answers. Conceiving trust as an attribute of bilateral relations (between those who trust and those who are trusted), it has paid scant attention to its domains.

In political science, it has been “customary to define different kinds of trust by virtue of the target being trusted” (Mutz and Reeves 2005: 6). Since citizens have been its privileged subjects, research on democratic trust has revolved around two broad types of trust that are defined by the addressees of citizen trust. *Horizontal trust* emerges between citizens (“social trust”) or groups of citizens (“ethnic trust”). *Vertical trust* runs from citizens to political elites (“political trust”) or institutions (“institutional trust”).<sup>12</sup> Within both families of trust, the literature has tended to treat trust as a generic attribute of bilateral relationships that requires clarifying the actors involved (the subjects and addressees of trust) yet not its substantive contents (the domains of trust), which are assumed to be open and diffuse.

Empirical studies of trust tend to rely on public opinion surveys that conceive political trust as a bilateral relationship among citizens, or between citizens and politicians, without explicit behavioral content.<sup>13</sup> Most established national and cross-national mass surveys on “social” or “generalized” trust ask respondents whether, “generally speaking, most people can be trusted” or not. These standard questions are vague about their social scope (who can be trusted) and silent about their substantive scope (who can be trusted to do what). Similarly, standard questionnaire items on “institutional trust” fail to explicate the domains of trust.

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<sup>11</sup> Even “generalized trust” is, of course, bounded. We call it “generalized” because it extends to whole categories of people and, also, because it covers the entire set of “ordinary” social norms (in given contexts). We need not, and cannot, specify these norms in advance (given the wide range of situations they regulate). They are delimited by prevalent conceptions of social appropriateness. If we extend “generalized trust” to strangers we do not expect them to display extraordinary wisdom, expertise, courage, or generosity, but “to do the right thing” in ordinary life, i.e. to treat us with decency and civility, not to lie and cheat on us, and not to rob and murder us. Within bounds, we may also expect acts of benevolence. We may expect our new neighbor to help us out with a little sugar but not to rescue us from bankruptcy. On “generalized” versus “particularistic” trust, see e.g. Levi (1998: 82–85), Newton (2007: 344–345 and 348–352), Offe (1999: 63–65), Seligman (1997), and Warren (2017).

<sup>12</sup> On the distinction between “horizontal” and “vertical” trust, see e.g. Newton (2007: 344), Offe (1999), and Sztompka (2010: 286).

<sup>13</sup> For an early critique, see Hardin (2002: 9–10 and 2013: 33).

They ask respondents how much “trust” or “confidence” they have in various public institutions, without inquiring into what it is they trust, or refuse to trust, these institutions to do or to accomplish. When institutions have clearly defined functional roles, the responses to such broad survey questions have a discernible meaning. Courts of justice, for instance, are supposed to settle conflicts in an impartial manner in the light of known facts and relevant laws.<sup>14</sup> Trusting them means trusting their competence and impartiality. Yet, what does it mean to trust partisan actors like the government, political parties, or the national parliament?<sup>15</sup>

Overall, for decades, public opinion surveys have been the method of choice in studies of trust and, “[d]espite some innovations” (Bauer and Freitag 2018: 20), we have been asking “the same survey questions” (Levi and Stoker 2000: 475) over and over. There is no doubt that it is important to identify the “objects” of citizen attitudes and to discern whether they trust, or distrust, the government of the day, specific institutions, or the entire democratic system.<sup>16</sup> Yet, if we wish to understand the seemingly “paradoxical place of trust within democracy” (Warren 1999: 310), we need to shed light on its content.

## THE DOMAINS OF DEMOCRATIC TRUST

Democratic actors compete over the definition and solution of collective problems within a preestablished set of political institutions that structure, absorb, and regulate their conflicts “according to rules” (Przeworski 2019: 150). Their competitive struggle over policies and positions of power (“the game of democratic politics”) is nested within these institutions that regulate the access to state power and its exercise (“the rules of the democratic game”). In the study of political regimes, it is common to conceive of the competition over power and policies as the “substantive” dimension of democratic politics, and the set of rules and institutions that enable and constrain it as its “procedural” dimension. The contrast between democratic “substance” and “procedure” has motivated well-established conceptual distinctions like polity vs policy, formal vs substantive definitions of democracy, formal vs. substantive justice, and procedural vs

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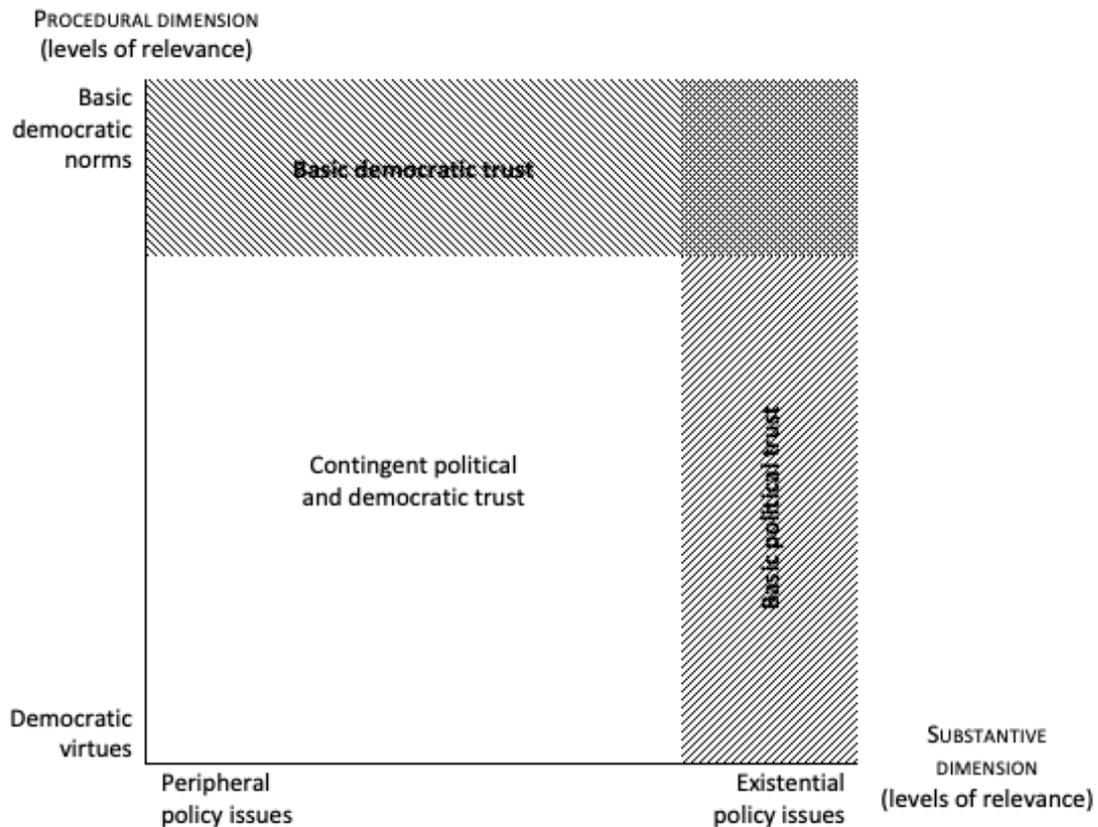
<sup>14</sup> The domain of trust is transparent, too, with respect to some forms of “democracy undermining trust” (Warren 2017). For instance, the participants in cooperative criminal enterprises, like mafia organizations, networks of corruption, or paramilitary groups, trust each other to protect each other through their silence.

<sup>15</sup> For broad reviews of comparative survey research on social and political trust, see Bauer and Freitag (2018) and Cleary and Stokes (2009: 316–321). On the distinction between partisan and impartial institutions, see e.g. Rothstein and Teorell (2008).

<sup>16</sup> For a synthesis of early debates in the U.S. on systemic vs. non-systemic distrust, see Levi and Stoker 2000: 477–480).

substantive political uncertainties.<sup>17</sup> It has not been harnessed in a systematic fashion, though, to structure our thinking about political trust.

**Figure 1**  
The domains of trust in political adversaries and public officials



If we accept that the distinction between “substance” and “procedure” captures two fundamental dimensions of democratic politics, then we should be prepared to accept that both constitute fundamental dimensions of political trust, too. If they structure democratic realities, then they are likely to structure democratic perceptions and expectations as well. I thus propose to distinguish the “substantive” trust political actors have in the policy performance of others (at the game level of democratic competition) from the “procedural” trust that they have in the rule compliance of others (at the meta-game level of democratic institutions). Arguably, it is one thing for citizens or politicians to trust that political

<sup>17</sup> The distinction between polity (the institutional framework of politics), policy (the substance of politics), and politics (the political process) is commonplace in political science. On procedural vs substantive definitions of democracy, see e.g. Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi (2005: 65–76), on formal vs substantive justice, see Rawls (1971: 54–60). On the distinction between procedural and substantive uncertainty, introduced by Przeworski (1986), see also Przeworski (1991), Bunce (1999), and Schedler (2013: Ch. 1).

actors play the democratic game well, that is, that they understand national problems, listen and speak to the people, recruit capable personnel, formulate and implement attractive policy programs, grasp and create opportunities, and weather crises with calm and competence (substantive assessments).<sup>18</sup> It is quite another thing for them to trust that the basic rules of the game are fair, that their adversaries adhere to them, and that existing agencies of accountability will punish them if they fail to do so (procedural assessments).

Figure 1 depicts these two domains of trust as orthogonal dimensions, with substantive issues on the horizontal and procedural issues on the vertical axis. Both domains contain a broad variety of matters that differ in the importance they have for contending actors. Some are trivial, others existential. Accordingly, the two axes span continua that run from low to high relevance.

### The Substantive Continuum

Substantive issues involve conflicts over both material interests and social norms. In terms of policy relevance, they range from minor to vital. The stakes of most policy decisions in consolidated democracies probably lie somewhere in between. Despite the widespread notion that politics has lost its relevance in the age of globalization, democratic politics still leaves its imprint in many areas of life. At different levels of governance, policymakers take myriad decisions, both small and big. They determine the structure of taxation, the access to health services, the location of public gardens, and much more. Many of their decisions are neither trivial nor earthshaking. In direct or indirect ways, they are *relevant* for the health and wellbeing of ordinary citizens, for their quality of life and their life chances, yet not *existential*. They do not endanger the material foundations of ordinary life nor the moral foundations of social life. They neither threaten citizens' "vital interests" nor their "basic values."

Of course, the location of public policies along the continuum between trite and existential matters may be contentious. Whether political actors perceive certain policies as reasonable answers to real challenges, or as dangerous responses to imaginary troubles, depends on their definition of public problems and private interests. Yet, regardless of their reasons, or the reasonableness of their reasons, they may trust, or distrust, other actors "to do the right thing" across the whole range of policy issues. Generally speaking, to the extent that political actors trust that others will do a good job in defining and resolving collective problems and

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<sup>18</sup> By one classic formulation, substantive trust is citizens' "express or tacit trust [that political power] shall be employed for their good and the preservation of their property" (Locke [1689] 1990: Ch 15, § 171).

conflicts, we can say that they have “substantive” or “political trust” (in a narrow sense). To the extent that they expect others to respect their “vital interests” and “basic values,” they enjoy a form of existential tranquility which we may call “basic political trust.”

According to one of the best-established theorems in comparative politics, democratic equilibria depend on such existential tranquility: when “the stakes of politics” are too high and democratic competition threatens to inflict unbearable costs on losers, political actors turn against the democratic process. Actors’ commitments to, and compliance with, basic democratic rules is contingent upon substantive limitations of the democratic game. Unless they see their vital interests guaranteed, they do not enter the game. As soon as they see them threatened, they leave it. The former is a key intuition in the literature on democratic transitions: authoritarian actors only accept loosening their grip on power if they are confident that a future democracy safeguards their vital interests and ensures that they will not end up jailed, exiled, or dead, with their wealth expropriated and their social status destroyed. The latter is a key intuition in the literature on democratic consolidation: political actors start turning against democracy when they see their adversaries as “existential threats” that promise economic catastrophe, organizational extinction, or moral bankruptcy.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Procedural Continuum**

In terms of democratic relevance, procedural issues range from rules of etiquette among equal citizens to the ground rules of the democratic game. A broad consensus exists on the nature of the latter, the fundamental norms of liberal democracy. They include the renunciation of violence, the respect for electoral integrity, the protection of individual liberties, and the acceptance of constitutional constraints.<sup>20</sup> Norms of democratic quality that transcend the procedural minimum are more variegated, open-ended, and controversial. They are meant to ensure not just the bare survival of democracy but its flourishing, and they comprise a broad variety of democratic virtues, such as an openness to argument and the willingness to listen (“deliberative virtues”),<sup>21</sup> fair play and self-restraint in the exercise of power (“forbearance”),<sup>22</sup> the transparent exercise of

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<sup>19</sup> See e.g. Acemoglu and Robinson (2006), Alexander (2002), Boix (2003), O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986: Ch. 4), and Przeworski (2019: Ch. 9).

<sup>20</sup> Among many others, see Dahl (1971), Diamond (1999), Mazzuca (2007), O’Donnell (2001), and Sartori (1987).

<sup>21</sup> See e.g. Scudder (2021).

<sup>22</sup> See e.g. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018).

power and its public justification (“publicity”),<sup>23</sup> and the respectful treatment of political adversaries (“civility”).<sup>24</sup> I will not attempt to weight these “democratic virtues” and place them on an ordinal scale. It suffices to maintain in mind that the normative demands of liberal democracy go beyond its *minima moralia*.

The broad notion of “procedural” or “democratic” trust is meant to cover the whole spectrum of democratic norms. To designate, more narrowly, trust in compliance with democratic ground rules, I propose the concept of “basic democratic trust.” In its presence, political actors recognize their competitors as trustworthy adversaries who play by the rules (rather than staging rebellions, cheating, or abusing their power). They also recognize existing agents of accountability as trustworthy checks on power that punish transgressive behavior in an evenhanded manner (rather than favoring friends, ceding to political pressure, going with the highest bidder, or acting out their prejudices).

## **BASIC DEMOCRATIC TRUST**

When common citizens, public officials, or political leaders embrace the belief that others (their political antagonists as well as neutral agents of the state) heed the fundamental norms of democratic conflict resolution, their democratic trust deserves to be described as “basic” for three reasons: it concerns the basic rules of the democratic game (and nothing else); it often takes the form of deep, tacit trust (similar to “generalized” trust in other spheres of life); and it appears as fundamental to the working of democracy (unlike trust in other domains).

### **The Domain of Basic Democratic Trust**

In the social sciences (as well as in ordinary life), we seek to use concepts at appropriate levels of abstraction. They should be neither too vague nor too specific for our analytic purposes. We do not want to lose ourselves in empty generalities or idle hair-splitting.<sup>25</sup> The most common justification for crafting new concepts stems from the perceived need to express ourselves at the appropriate level of differentiation. We introduce novel concepts to rescale “the ladder of abstraction” (Sartori 1970) either to see things together which we usually keep apart, or to hold things apart which we usually see together. By carving out a distinctive empirical terrain, the notion of “basic democratic trust” strives to

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<sup>23</sup> See e.g. Christiano (2004).

<sup>24</sup> See e.g. Calhoun (2000).

<sup>25</sup> On the goal of “analytic differentiation,” see Collier and Levitsky (1997).

anchor the debate on democracy and trust at an intermediate level of abstraction that heightens certain distinctions while blurring others.

*Drawing distinctions:* The “basic democratic trust” of actors who perceive their adversaries as trustworthy participants in the democratic game, that is, as rule-abiding players who respect the fundamental norms and principles of the game in both speech and deed,<sup>26</sup> occupies a conceptual terrain distinct from other forms of political trust. Its domain is limited to democracy’s basic norms and principles. It may, or may not, go hand in hand with trust in other spheres of politics. Even when actors trust the basic democratic commitments of others, they may very well distrust their wisdom on substantive issues. They may think that they are ideologically misguided, support harmful policy proposals, have deep character flaws, and lead amoral private lives. Or they may mistrust their democratic virtuousness. While confident that their contenders do not plan coups or rig elections, they may still expect them to wage smear campaigns, accept gray money, or flood voters with false promises and empty slogans.

The notion of “basic democratic trust” also involves its sharp distinction from “basic political trust.” This dividing line tends to get blurred in the literature on democratic stability and crises. Of course, “substantive threats” to vital interests and “procedural threats” to democratic ground rules are empirically interconnected. When political actors respond to substantive threats by abandoning their democratic commitments, their adversaries are likely to take notice and start viewing them as democratically untrustworthy. Moreover, strong ideological affinities exist between procedural and substantive trustworthiness. In the history of democracy, committed democrats have often been accommodating (“moderate”) in their policy demands, while “radicals” have sought to establish authoritarian regimes to impose their disruptive policy programs.<sup>27</sup>

However, even though the empirical association between substantive and procedural threats and threat perceptions may be strong, it is anything but watertight. Cases of divergence come easily to mind. Exponents of democratic radicalism, like Bernie Sanders or Greta Thunberg, pursue transformative politics that threaten multiple interests, yet do so within the democratic framework.<sup>28</sup> And self-serving authoritarians like Hungary’s Viktor Orbán have been subverting democratic institutions without pursuing any substantive policy program other than maximizing their own payoffs (without forgetting their friends and followers).<sup>29</sup> In any case, it is only by drawing a clear conceptual distinction

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<sup>26</sup> On the (weak) distinction between “behavioral” and “discursive” violations of democratic norms, see Schedler (2019).

<sup>27</sup> See e.g. Mainwaring and Pérez Liñan (2013).

<sup>28</sup> For succinct statements, in their own words, see e.g. Sanders (2021) and Thunberg (2019).

<sup>29</sup> On “power, greed, and corruption” under Viktor Orbán, see e.g. Lendvai (2016: Ch. 15) and Magyar (2016).

between these two domains of democratic politics and democratic trust that we will be able to trace their empirical relationships.

*Seeing commonalities:* While drawing an external demarcation line vis-à-vis substantive trust, the concept of basic democratic trust erases multiple internal lines of division among subtypes of democratic trust. By placing all fundamental “procedural” issues into a single conceptual box, it introduces a new level of generality that brings together debates that have been conducted at separate tables.

Even while procedural trust has been a peripheral concern to students of political trust and “perceptions of process” have not been integrated “into the major national [or cross-national] surveys” (Citrin and Stoker 2018: 60), scholars of “institutional trust” have long been aware of their importance. They have been aware of the fact that non-partisan institutions of government, such as public bureaucracies, courts, security agencies, regulatory bodies, and electoral authorities, are vital depositories of trust. They provide the formal framework for democratic competition. Contending actors need to be able to trust that they serve, by and large, the purposes that they are designed to serve (see e.g. Warren 2017: 46–49). However, to the extent that political scientists have studied the trust that actors place in the integrity of democratic institutions, they have done so within self-contained islands of disciplinary specialization. For instance, scholarly debates on the legitimacy of judicial institutions,<sup>30</sup> perceptions of electoral integrity,<sup>31</sup> trust in impartial institutions (e.g. Rothstein and Stolle 2008), and trust in news media (e.g. Fisher 2018) have evolved in parallel fashion, without touching upon each other. Furthermore, authors have conceptualized procedural dimensions of trust in a disjointed manner. Mark Warren, for example, distinguishes between trust in the integrity of experts, trust in the impartiality of non-partisan public agencies, and trust in the institutional fairness of democratic competition (see Warren 2017: 46–49). What remains missing is an overarching concept for actor judgments on the procedural reliability of democratic institutions.

The notion of “basic democratic trust” provides a conceptual umbrella that groups, under one conceptual heading, beliefs and expectations about actor compliance with any “basic democratic norm” – from the renunciation of violence to the acceptance of elections, from the civilian subordination of the military to the tolerance of pluralism. It is meant to provide a common language for analyzing the whole range of concerns about the commitment of citizens, politicians, and public officials to fundamental democratic rules and norms. Thus, while it is

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<sup>30</sup> For syntheses, see Gibson (2006: 523–528) and Tyler (1998).

<sup>31</sup> See e.g. Berlinski et al. (2021), Birch (2008), Frank and Martínez (2017), Kerr and Lührmann (2017), and Rosas (2010).

distinctive in its level of specificity (through its exclusive focus on procedural anxieties), it is distinctive, too, in its level of generality (through its integrative focus on all kinds of perceived threats to the integrity of the democratic game).

### **The Depth of Basic Democratic Trust**

We can speak of “basic” democratic trust to denote the broad category of behavior to which it refers: compliance with “basic” democratic norms. But the adjective also serves to express the strength of expectations that characterize democratic equilibria: the depth of trust. In his seminal studies of stages of child development, social psychologist Erik Erikson coined the concept of “basic trust” to describe the existential security of the very young and dependent child that comes to perceive the world as a familiar, secure place in which caring humans nurture and protect it, rather than neglecting, ignoring, or hurting it (see Erikson [1950] 1993). Of course, there is “more naïveté and more mutuality” (p. 247) in the infant who trusts her mother than in the political actor who trusts her adversaries or institutions. Still, even if our “basic democratic trust” may not have the emotional, irreflexive, unquestioning quality of the child’s trust, it fulfils a similar role. It allows us (unlike the trusting baby) to know that the world is a dangerous place and to relax and stay calm nevertheless and enjoy the fruits of human cooperation without worrying about dark possibilities of betrayal and deception.

Niklas Luhmann (1973) conceived of trust as a mechanism for reducing the complexity of the social world. Perhaps more precisely, it serves as a mechanism for *ignoring* the complexity of the world, that is, for ignoring the countless possibilities of harm that threaten to disrupt our ordinary lives at any moment. Basic trust allows us to assume a benevolent world and lead our lives without paying attention to the manifold scenarios of malevolence that lurk underneath the surface of social cooperation. We can go out and enjoy dinner with friends at a restaurant without keeping running tallies of all the objective risks to which we expose ourselves, from reckless drivers to mass shootings and poisoned food. If we did so (beyond our pandemic precautions against coronavirus infections), our friends might refer us to psychiatric treatment.

Under conditions of “democracy normalcy,” we should expect basic democratic trust to work in such a tacit manner as a cognitive frame that structures actors’ experience of the political world by keeping the multitude of damaging possible worlds outside of their field of vision. In a “climate” (Baier 1986) of mutual basic democratic trust, political actors do not expect others to do certain things, like staging coups, falsifying elections, or bribing judges. Their reciprocal trust limits their choice set by limiting their political imagination: “no one can imagine acting outside the democratic institutions” (Przeworski 1991: 26). Basic normative

transgressions become unthinkable. Actors do not consider them, and even if prompted refuse to consider them as relevant strategic possibilities. In its broad assumption of good faith, decency, and reciprocal reliability, basic democratic trust resembles the modern phenomenon of “generalized social trust” among strangers through which “personal encounters are relieved of the suspicion of malign interest” (Warren 1999: 314). The firmer their tacit expectations are within a prevailing “climate of trust” (Baier 1986), the less do actors need to spell them out. Public expressions of shock and disbelief in the face of extraordinary acts of transgression, like terrorist attacks or political assassinations, are measures of their strength.<sup>32</sup>

To comprehend the quiet presence of basic democratic trust, we need not look far. Our own discipline, modern political science, has been grounded in basic democratic trust. It has framed its inquiries through deeply trusting lenses. Often described as “the science of democracy”, it has been studying the competitive game of democratic politics while taking its cooperative foundations for granted. For decades, we scholars of politics have been studying the nuts and bolts of democratic political systems, from civil society, party organizations, mass media, electoral campaigns, and voter choices to government coalitions, judicial decision-making, legislative politics, bureaucratic regulation, and executive policy making – and we have been doing so under the firm, tacit assumption that the basic rules of the democratic game were effectively and unquestionably in place. We have been able to look at the moving picture of democratic competition while holding its procedural framework constant.

Nowhere is the strength of basic democratic trust more evident than in the “rational” study of politics. When studying the politics of established democracies through the lens of political rationality, we often assume that political actors maximize their personal utility within the normative bounds of democracy. For instance, we treat presidents, legislators, and judges as self-interested actors who behave strategically to optimize their payoffs – yet always within the limits of law and the division of power. Their choice sets exclude violence, fraud, and other antidemocratic courses of action. Given rules and institutions serve as effective constraints on their strategic calculations, and even when they attempt to change them, they do so within given rules of rule-change (Tsebelis 1990).<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Societal reactions to the assassination of Japan’s former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe are a recent example. See e.g. Daisuke Wakabayashi, Ben Dooley, and Hikari Hida, “Assassination Shocks a Nearly Gun-Free Japan,” *New York Times* (8 July 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/08/world/asia/japan-abe-murder-guns.html>.

<sup>33</sup> For overviews, see Cameron (2006) on presidential politics, Laver (2006) on legislative politics, and McCubbins and Rodriguez (2006) on judicial politics. In the “nested games” analyzed by George Tsebelis (1990), strategic interaction *within* rules at the game level goes

By contrast, when applying theories of rational decision making to polities in which the rule of law is fragile and violence pervasive, we treat violence, fraud, and crime as natural options which rational actors choose at their convenience. For example, students of authoritarianism have analyzed mass repression, murder, and electoral fraud as rational strategies of political survival by dictators;<sup>34</sup> students of civil war have analyzed indiscriminate violence, rape, and terrorism as rational instruments of political persuasion by social minorities;<sup>35</sup> and students of organized violence have analyzed the torture, killing, and disappearance of citizens as rational business strategies of criminal entrepreneurs.<sup>36</sup>

Such contrasting conceptions of “the rational pursuit of self-interest” reflect contrasting conditions of trust. In the presence of basic democratic trust, we expect political actors to go about their business of personal utility maximization without corrupting, defrauding, torturing, or murdering their co-citizens. By contrast, in its absence, anything seems possible, and the range of choices we expect “rational” political actors to consider is not confined by normative or legal constraints.<sup>37</sup>

## The Role of Basic Democratic Trust

Democracy, the rule by the people, is a normative concept. Its core principles of equality and liberty stand against those that have governed human societies during most of our collective existence: hierarchy and oppression. The set of modern representative institutions which we describe as democratic strives to put these principles into practice: constitutional government, individual rights and liberties, the rule of law, competitive elections, universal suffrage, representative

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hand in hand with strategic competition *over* rules at the meta-game level. Studying the politics of institutional change in highly institutionalized contexts, Tsebelis assumes conditions of firm procedural trust. Players can take the effectiveness of formal rules for granted: “each player expects every other player to conform to them” (Tsebelis 1990: 94).

<sup>34</sup> See e.g. Egorov and Sonin (2015) and Svoboda (2012).

<sup>35</sup> See e.g. Kalyvas (2006) and Weinstein (2007).

<sup>36</sup> See e.g. Durán-Martínez (2015) and Trejo and Ley (2018).

<sup>37</sup> In his self-critical meditation on institutional failures, Kenneth Shepsle, one of the foremost representatives of rational choice institutionalism, admits that formal political institutions do not always act as effective constraints on political behavior. Political entrepreneurs may move the horizons of “political imagination” and overstep them. His collection of historical instances in which political actors “imaginatively” chose to ignore, circumvent, reinterpret, bend, or break formal rules includes the irregular redefinition of rules of legislative debate, electoral fraud, generous judicial interpretations of bankruptcy laws, imaginative practices of public accounting, the use of torture by intelligence agencies, and various forms of “benign” or “malignant” vigilantism (Shepsle 2017).

legislatures, checks and balances, divisions of power, civil society, mass media, and the public space. Democracy requires these institutions. Without them, it cannot be said to exist. Yet, democracy also requires behavior which is consistent with its principles and institutions. It requires active compliance. Otherwise, its principles are empty rhetoric, and its institutions are empty shells (see Schedler 2013). The question is whether democracy demands more. Does it demand, not just compliance, but mutual trust in compliance? The literature on democratic equilibria and democratic consolidation suggests that it does.

“Democracy is consolidated when under given political and economic conditions a particular system of institutions becomes the only game in town, when no one can imagine acting outside the democratic institutions” (Przeworski 1991: 26). In such happy, monoludic settlements, “all the actors in the polity [have] become habituated to the fact that political conflict will be resolved according to the established norms” (Linz and Stepan 1996: 5).<sup>38</sup> In political science, the metaphor of “the only game in town” has become a conventional formula for describing democratic equilibria.<sup>39</sup> It pictures more than a state of universal *norm compliance* in which political actors know, accept, and obey the fundamental rules of the democratic game. It pictures a state of universal *expectations* of norm compliance in which political actors expect all others to know, accept, and obey the fundamental rules of the democratic game as well. In other words, it pictures in essence a state of “basic democratic trust” among actors. All relevant actors play by democratic rules and assume that everybody else does so as well.<sup>40</sup>

In the arid language of expected utility calculations, the fiduciary bases of democratic equilibria often remain implicit. Even scholars who place trust at the very center of their analysis may not make it explicit in their terminological choices. For instance, the political economy of regime stability revolves around one core problem: the absence of third-party enforcement, which renders compliance with mutually binding rules dependent on trust among relevant actors. It is no more than a terminological convention that political economists do not speak about “trust” and “trustworthiness” but “credible commitment” (e.g. Acemoglu and Robinson 2006).

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<sup>38</sup> Of course, the above references to “no one” and “all the actors” are not to be read literally. There are always exceptions to universal compliance: deviance always exists. The usual reference is to all “relevant” or “significant” political actors” (see e.g. Schneider 2009: 14–18).

<sup>39</sup> A search in Google Academics by the keywords “democracy only game in town” delivers about 778,000 results (19 July 2022).

<sup>40</sup> In a similar manner, as János Kis has pointed out, John Rawls’ “ideal theory” of democracy (1971) presupposes not just universal compliance with democratic norms, but universal trust in universal compliance (2022).

Overall, regardless of whether established theories of democratic stability use the language of trust, they grant it a central role in democratic conflict resolution. What I propose to call “basic democratic trust,” political actors’ fundamental confidence in reciprocal fair play, appears as nothing less than the cement of democracy. It is the invisible glue that keeps democratic conflict from flying apart. It allows democracy to unfold as a rule-governed competitive game, structured by (minimally) fair rules, played by (generally) compliant contenders, and overseen by (mostly) impartial arbiters.<sup>41</sup>

## CONTINGENT DEMOCRATIC TRUST

The twin distinction between domains of democratic trust (substance versus procedure), and between primary and secondary matters within these domains, allowed us to delimitate the terrain in which trust is fundamental for “making democracy work” (Putnam 1994): actors’ commitment to the ground rules of democracy. Given their recurrent causal relevance, existential substantive threats may claim similar status. Such threats need not push actors towards non-democratic behavior. Nevertheless, the mere potential for them to do so turns “basic political trust” into a precious cushion of democratic competition. While not strictly necessary for “making democracy work” (Putnam 1994), it does make things a lot easier. Figure 1 above accordingly highlights both spheres of “basic” trust. As it indicates, too, by default in all other domains the democratic role of trust is contingent. It may be helpful, superfluous, or even harmful for the working of democracy. Its democratic roles depend on the type of relationship under consideration.

*Relations among citizens:* While citizens in pluralistic societies may not share substantive worldviews, they need to share, and to believe they share, basic rules of peaceful coexistence. For them to sustain democracy as “a system of shared liability” and exercise their collective “job of making political decisions” (Beerbohm 2012: 28), they require a climate of basic democratic trust. Without reasonable expectations of fair play among citizens, cooperative enterprises like walking the streets, paying taxes, or filling public offices by voting would be hard to sustain (see also Lenard 2008).

*Relations among allies:* Among people who do share certain political concerns or affinities, some measure of substantive trust is required to make collective action,

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<sup>41</sup> As trust is not, in itself, a moral virtue (Baier 1986, Hardin 2002), the need for basic democratic trust is not a moral demand. It is, however, grounded in two sets of moral demands: actors must comply with basic democratic norms, and observers must assess their rule compliance (trustworthiness) in a fair manner.

and thus the formation of political parties, civic associations, and social movements, possible. In order to cooperate, like-minded citizens need at least some mutual confidence in the sincerity and strength of their political commitments. Otherwise, it would be hard to build or sustain neighborhood associations, social movements, or political parties. The literature on social capital, for instance, conceives of trust in such a manner, as a requisite of social and political cooperation (e.g. Putnam 1994).

*Relations among adversaries:* Modern democracy involves political pluralism. It is not an institutional device for celebrating harmony, but a system for processing conflict. Alongside cooperative relations among allies, it involves competitive relations among adversaries. And even though democratic conflict needs to be contained by basic democratic trust to keep it from escalating into warfare, adversarial relations commonly involve substantive distrust among contending parties. Political actors have no reason to trust the policy diagnoses and prescriptions of their adversaries; they may have good reasons to distrust their democratic virtuousness; and they may even come to perceive them as threats to their existential tranquility.

*Relations between citizens and representatives:* In the study of trust, we need to recognize the adversarial nature of liberal democracy which limits the collective trustworthiness of contending actors. In addition, we need to recognize the representative nature of democracy which limits the collective trustworthiness of political elites. Democratic representation involves a structural gap between citizens and their representatives. The notion that representatives “act in the interests of” their constituencies is complex and precarious (see Pitkin 1967). Notoriously, the asymmetry of power between politicians and citizens invites abuse by the former and demands “eternal vigilance” by the latter. Just like interparty competition, which lives on a mixture of trust in allies and distrust of adversaries, democratic representation demands a mixture of trust and distrust in representatives. To the extent that citizens identify with political parties, the substantive trust they extend to them is likely to be “selective” (Warren 2017: 49–50) rather than comprehensive (see also Rothstein and Stolle 2008). By contrast, in decent, well-functioning democracies, citizens should be able to trust the basic democratic commitment of their representatives regardless of party membership. Note, though, that perceptions of democratic trustworthiness do not obviate the need for democratic vigilance. Democratic trust should never be blind. Rather, it must remain conscious of its own practical and institutional prerequisites (see also Lenard 2008).

*Relations towards public officials:* The liberal-democratic promise to establish “the rule of law, not men” requires that citizens can trust the integrity of public officials who are in charge of (“entrusted with”) finding and imposing the law. Citizens may

harbor “basic democratic distrust” towards their adversaries as well as their representatives. They may fear that, under certain circumstances, their fellow citizens or their representatives may be tempted to cheat on them and break democratic ground rules. However, for democratic conflict to remain within the bounds of law, they need to be able to trust that transgressors will be held accountable. They need to be able to trust the integrity of the guardians of the law. Public agents of surveillance and punishment are the enforcers of last resort of basic democratic rules. They are the last line of defense against their infringement. When they fall into disrepute, the liberal-democratic architecture of accountability risks dissolving into a cacophony of mutual recriminations. Recent partisan controversies about criminal prosecutions of politicians in Latin America illustrate the political turbulence that conflicting perceptions of the justice system may cause.<sup>42</sup>

## THE OPPOSITES OF TRUST

Our efforts to understand the role of trust in democracy have been hampered by our failure to clarify the domains of political trust, but also by our failure to clarify the opposites of trust. Trust and distrust are contrasting judgments on the risks of social cooperation – on the possibility that others may betray their cooperative commitments. These commitments may be explicit, as with the making of promises or the contracting of debts, or implicit, as with the ethos of friendship or the norms of civility among strangers. In either case, “when we trust people, we rely upon them to meet their commitments” (Hawley 2012: 5). Distrusting them means doubting that they will do so or fearing that they will not. It involves “suspicion or doubt about their motives or intentions” (Lenard 2008: 216).

By contrast, if we are *certain* that others will not honor their commitments, or do not accept them in the first place, because they do not care about us or mean us ill then the assumption of *cooperative relations* becomes untenable and gives way to a presumption of *confrontational relations*. Accordingly, the risks of cooperation (the problem of trust) give way to the certainties of confrontation (the problem of enmity). Instead of pondering the *possibility* of betrayal by cooperative partners, antagonists need to deal with the *certainty* of hostile intentions by their enemies. We share a common ground of social commitments with those whom we consider unreliable but not with those whom we consider hostile.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> See e.g. the chapters on Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, and Guatemala in Botero, Brinks, and González-Ocantos (2022).

<sup>43</sup> On the dependence of both trust and distrust on prior obligations or commitments, see also Hawley (2012) and Patterson (1999: 153).

Clarifying “the opposite, negation, or absence” of a concept is “[c]rucial to concept formation” (Goertz and Mazur 2008: 25). Now, depending on the frame of reference, we can think of trust as having two alternative opposites. Within cooperative relations, it is distrust that represents the polar opposite of trust. Within the whole range of social relations, that place is taken by enmity. Or more precisely, it is taken by “enemyopia,” the perception of others as enemies (“enemies in our eyes”). If trust involves a “reliance on another’s good will” (Baier 1986: 234), perceived hostility involves an assumption of bad will.

The literature on democracy and trust has tended to conflate this pair of opposites. Democracies have a hard time processing conflicts between enemies who seek to eliminate each other from the common battleground of democratic competition.<sup>44</sup> Yet, warnings against the dangers of hostile relationships in democracy commonly fail to distinguish between distrust and perceived enmity. They tightly associate “mistrust and intolerance” (Norris, Frank, and Martínez 2015: L 204), “partisan hostility and distrust” (Levitsky and Ziblatt 120), or “mistrust, hatred, and intimidation” (Mounk 2018: 102).<sup>45</sup> In contradistinction, Table 1 sums up the entire spectrum of mutual expectations among participants in democratic politics, with basic democratic trust and perceived enmity (“enemyopia”) at its extremes and basic democratic distrust in the middle.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Among many others, see Alexander (2002), Dahl (1971), Kirshner (2014), and Przeworski (2015 and 2019).

<sup>45</sup> The conflation of enmity and distrust carries practical implications. Authors who equate distrust with enmity cannot but reach the conclusion that, being hostile to hostility, democracy requires trust: democrats need to “build trust and reduce mutual hostility” (Mounk 2018; 171).

<sup>46</sup> Clearly, one may conceptualize the continuum of uncertainties that lies between the certainties of “blind trust” and “blind enemyopia” in manifold ways. For instance, some authors conceive “mistrust” (“the absence of trust”) and “skepticism” (the critical caution of “vigilant citizens”) as intermediate attitudes in between trust and distrustful “cynicism” (see van der Meer and Zmerli 2017: 1 and 5; or for similar distinctions, Lenard 2008, and Puustinen and Seppänen 2013: 24–28).). However, unless we clarify the nature of the relation in play (cooperation vs confrontation), both the nature of the “negative pole” and its distinctiveness from intermediate attitudes remain unclear.

**Table 1**  
Expectations of Democratic Norm Compliance

	<i>Basic trust</i>	<i>democratic distrust</i>	<i>Democratic enemyopia</i>
Relationship	Cooperation	Cooperation	Confrontation
Basic norms	Shared	Shared, but doubtful	Not shared
Basic interests	Convergent	Uncertain	Conflicting
Transgressive intentions	Absent	Contingent	Certain
Risk perception	Very low to zero	Very low to medium	High
Type of actors	Loyal	Semi-loyal	Disloyal
Level of alert	Low to zero: subjective security	Medium to high: guarded anxiety	High: certain threat

Both basic democratic trust and distrust among political actors presume a joint initial commitment to the basic rules of the democratic game. Their expectations that adversaries will, or may not, honor their democratic commitments are grounded in beliefs about moral motivations or utilitarian calculations. Perceptions of shared norms and interests breed trust, while doubts about common norms and interests breed distrust. In situations of democratic enemyopia, by contrast, there is little room for doubt about either: the conflict between antagonists extends to norms as well as interests. By definition, actors attribute hostile intentions to perceived enemies and expect them to act upon these intentions when given the opportunity. Though we may (or may not) trust enemies to be restrained by self-interested calculation, it would be foolish to expect them “to look after, rather than harm, things [we care] about” (Baier 1986: 259).<sup>47</sup>

These three broad types of judgments on the democratic reliability of political actors (from the viewpoint of political participants) correspond neatly to the three-fold classification of actors which Juan Linz developed (from the viewpoint of the external observer) in his seminal discussion of political opposition under

<sup>47</sup> One famous example is the rational, reciprocal self-restraint of soldiers in the trenches of World War I, see Axelrod (1984: Ch. 4).

democracy: “loyal” actors unequivocally support democracy and “disloyal” ones openly oppose it, while ambiguous “semi-loyal” actors in between make themselves suspicious because they act in contradictory manners (Linz 1978: 27–38). The level of democratic alertness varies in accordance with the degree of confidence they inspire. Democrats can “relax” (Di Palma 1990: 141) in their interactions with trustworthy adversaries, need to be on guard in their relations with suspicious ones, and must prepare for the worst in their encounters with (perceived) enemies of democracy.<sup>48</sup>

## THE UNMOORING OF DEMOCRACY

Trust is a scarce, fragile resource (Gambetta 1988: 224, Baier 1986: 242). In historical terms, the prevalence and resilience of a climate of basic democratic trust in the “consolidated” democracies of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from Sweden to Spain, from Canada to Costa Rica, from Austria to Australia, and from India to Japan, must be considered an extraordinary achievement. It may have been an exceptional, transient achievement. Today, the shared certainty of democratic fair play it involved is under attack from multiple sides. In many democracies, basic democratic trust has been giving way, not to mere distrust, but to democratic enemyopia. Driven by the conviction that others are not just unreliable democrats, but enemies of democracy, the public imagination of the evils that political actors may be willing to inflict on others has expanded dramatically.

We can observe the public destruction of basic democratic trust in variegated contemporary phenomena like the rise of “authoritarian populists” (Norris and Inglehart 2019) who deny the democratic credentials of representative politicians;<sup>49</sup> the dynamics of political polarization in which adversaries view each other as agents of democratic subversion (Schedler 2022); the spread of conspiracy theories that understand democracy as a mere façade for covert elite actors who strive “to subvert and destroy everything that is decent and worth preserving” (Bale 2007: 51);<sup>50</sup> the recurrence of terrorism in the name of Islam that has been corroding trust in the civility of an entire community of faith;<sup>51</sup> or the

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<sup>48</sup> Even the relative tranquility that basic democratic trust affords does not relieve citizens of the necessity of democratic vigilance. Preserving a “climate of trust” (Baier 1986) requires supporting institutions as well as practices of accountability (Lenard 2008).

<sup>49</sup> See e.g. Müller (2017) and Urbinati (2019).

<sup>50</sup> See e.g. Lenard (2012) and Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019).

<sup>51</sup> See e.g. Esposito and Mogahed (2007) and Kepel (2017)

private arms race among U.S. citizens who, armed to their teeth already, acquire more and more firearms during each national crisis in the name of self-defense against their fellow citizens (see e.g. Lang and Lang 2020).

When basic democratic trust gives way to fears of democratic enemies, democracy does not collapse (at once), but it turns into a very different game – a game without frontiers, without assurances, without restraints. Its institutional boundaries blur, and its strategic possibilities become infinite. Once political actors come to believe that their adversaries do not heed the ground rules of the democratic game but are willing and able to bend and break them in their pursuit of self-interest or ideological goals, their structure of choice changes radically. Pushed out of the institutional arena of bounded competition, they find themselves thrown into an unstructured battlefield. As they see themselves as victims of institutional manipulation, illegal repression, electoral fraud, or partisan justice, the gates that lead from peaceful competition between adversaries to warfare between enemies are pushed open. With dramatic clarity, we have seen the logic of torn democratic trust play out in the assault on the U.S. Capitol on 6 January 2021.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper pursued a threefold conceptual innovation. First, it sought to provide an instrument of orientation: a novel map. The literature on trust and democracy, though sophisticated and insightful, has proceeded without a map of the content of democratic trust. Focused on relations of trust, it has neglected its domains. By distinguishing between substantive and procedural domains of political trust (as well as between existential issues and other, less relevant ones), this paper introduced not a full map, but the coordinates that allow us to draw one.

Secondly, the paper sought to introduce an instrument of communication: a novel concept. In the literature on democratic stability and crises, there is a clear recognition that for democracy to endure political actors must comply with its basic norms. There is also a vague recognition that political actors need to expect others to do the same. However, beyond the metaphor of “the only game in town,” we have no common vocabulary for describing such expectations of democratic norm compliance. Grounded in my two-dimensional map, the notion of “basic democratic trust” seeks to provide it.

Finally, the paper sought to clarify the two opposites of trust: doubts about democratic commitments (distrust) and certainties of democratic hostility

(enemyopia). The former presupposes common moral ground, whereas the latter presumes a separation of moral universes. While democracy can live with uncertainties about actors' democratic commitments (basic democratic distrust), its institutions of conflict regulation drown in controversy when actors start seeing each other as agents of democratic subversion (democratic enemyopia).

Does my map of "basic" and "contingent" trust resolve the longstanding "paradox" of trust and democracy? Though rough and preliminary, my argumentative scaffolding does indeed suggest that the ambivalent role of trust in democracy is neither mysterious nor paradoxical. The apparent paradox can be dissolved by clarifying all three constitutive parts of trust relationships. If we explicate not only the participants in trust relations (who trusts whom), but also their domains (with regard to what), then the fog that has enveloped debates on trust and democracy dissipates.

What do the notions of "basic democratic trust" and "democratic enemyopia" add to our comprehension of democracy? They give us a language to talk about the hidden, cognitive bases of democratic stability: firm, tacit, mutual expectations of norm compliance that define what is "normal" and what is "unthinkable" in the competitive game of politics. And they give us a language to talk about the destruction of such expectations of fair play in processes of democratic subversion. The contentiousness of the 2020 U.S. presidential election illustrates the centrality of basic democratic trust in times of crisis. What drives processes of political polarization in the U.S. as well as elsewhere, from Argentina to the Philippines, from Spain to Poland, and from Mexico to India, may be neither policy disagreement nor mutual intolerance, but the evaporation of basic democratic trust among political adversaries who come to see each other as enemies of democracy. And the first thing that falls apart in processes of democratic subversion may not be compliance with democratic ground rules, but trust in their binding force. This paper has done no more than lay out some conceptual groundwork. Documenting and explaining the reproduction of basic democratic trust that sustains democratic equilibria as well as its destruction in times of democratic crisis will be a task for future research. It will be huge and complex and, trust me, badly needed.

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