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Undermining or defending democracy? The consequences of distrust for democratic attitudes and participation

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ABSTRACT

We can observe a well-documented decline of trust levels in Western societies: from the reputation of political representatives as being 'not trustworthy' to the rise of anti-system-oriented populist parties. Yet the implications of different forms of distrust for a society and democratic institutions have been theorized in conflicting ways so far. In order to illuminate existing inconsistencies in social and democratic theory, this article addresses two research questions: What are the implications of different manifestations of distrust for the acceptance of democracy and democratic institutions? How do different forms of distrust affect the motivation to become engaged in democratic decision-making and in civil society institutions? Taking empirical evidence from 25 focus groups in Germany, our findings show that growing social divisions affect the role distrust plays for political interest representation of social groups and for the acceptance of liberal representative democracy.

KEYWORDS

Distrust; trust; non-participation; representation; populism; social capital

Introduction

We constantly discover signals of thriving and rising distrust between citizens, institutions, and nations almost everywhere (Levi and Stoker 2000). The reputation of political representatives as being 'not trustworthy', the rise of anti-system-oriented populist parties, as well as the trend of decreasing voter-turnout confirm a well-documented decline of trust levels within Western societies well able to shake the foundations of representative democracies (Behnke 2009; Parvin 2015). Yet while the consequences of existing levels of distrust for the individual have been developed extensively (Sennett 1999; Luhmann 2009), the implications of mounting distrust for a society and its political institutions are controversial as they have been theoretically conceptualized in different ways (Ullmann-Margalit 2004). Some scholars have placed a cautious and vigilant attitude of *not* trusting those in power at the center of any democratic institutions and as a fundamental democratic principle (Barber 1983). Others have objected this and have focused on *social trust* in the fellow citizen as crucial to any trust toward a representative and the delegation of power to him (Uslaner 2002). While in the former case rising levels of distrust in other citizens, a political representative, or the political institutions would not impose a burden on the functioning of a liberal

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representative democracy, in the latter it could frustrate legitimate democratic decision-making. Yet the different implications and potential outcomes of different types of trust or distrust for a society have hardly been distinguished (Nannestad 2008).

In addition, existing levels of distrust have been suggested to have contrasting effects on political participation, depending on social and individual preconditions (Gamson 1968; Braun and Hutter 2016). Whereas some scholars have underlined the mobilizing character of distrust given certain resources such as political interest, political efficacy, or education (Gamson 1968), others have highlighted a distrust-induced withdrawal and disenchantment (Schäfer 2015). As citizen participation has always been understood as a key feature of any vital democracy (Hooghe, Hosch-Dayican, and van Deth 2014), analyzing the impact of distrust on the willingness to engage is an important cornerstone to understand its implications for democracy.

In order to address existing inconsistencies in social and democratic theory, this article seeks to explore circumstances under which distrust can be understood as a positive attitude toward democracy as it contributes to a better control of political power and under which circumstances it leads to a shrinking acceptance of representative institutions that in the end undermines democracy. The article focuses on two research questions: it asks (a) for the implications of different manifestations of distrust for the acceptance of democracy and democratic institutions and it analyzes (b) possible effects of distrust on the motivation to become engaged in democratic decision-making or in civil society institutions. By addressing these two research areas qualitatively, it seeks to help disentangle existing contradictions in social and democratic theory and to explore possible consequences of distrust that go beyond the mere absence of trust (van de Walle and Six 2014).

The authors have been involved in several projects analyzing various (non-)mobilizations of distrust toward democratic decision-making in Germany: (a) the biographical background and the democratic attitudes of those active within non-traditional forms of participation such as civil protesting (Walter et al. 2013; Klecha, Marg, and Butzlaff 2013; Butzlaff 2016; Hoeft, Messinger-Zimmer, and Zilles 2017); (b) non-voters who have ceased to trust any established political process (Blaeser et al. 2016); (c) citizens of municipalities where participatory processes did take place but who chose to abstain from participating (Hoeft 2017; Hanisch and Messinger-Zimmer 2017). Each represents a very different way in which citizens can engage or disengage with democratic processes. If the assumption that differing forms and roots of trust and distrust form the way in which citizens relate to democracy is correct, a comparison between these groups should reveal differing patterns of trust and distrust. Focus group interviews that have been conducted within the mentioned projects form the empirical foundation of this article but have been regrouped and interpreted with the research interest formulated above.

The structure of the article is as follows: In Section ‘Distrust: between a requirement and a liability for democracy’, we access existing conceptualizations of political distrust and their consequences for the attitudes toward representative democracy. In Section ‘Distrust: between mobilizing and discouraging participation’, we review previous theorizations of distrust leading to political mobilization or to a withdrawn and passive attitude. Section ‘Data and methods’ reviews the methods and data used. Section ‘The distrusting’ addresses expressions of political distrust in contemporary Germany and

specifically asks for differences in the attitude toward democracy and the willingness to participate in democratic decision-making. Section ‘Undermining the preconditions of democratic representation’ summarizes the factors that contribute to different types of distrust and explores their consequences on democratic attitudes and mobilization: The article shows that while some social groups develop a politically highly activated and self-confident distrust aiming at influencing democratic decision-making, others develop a passive and reclusive type of distrust. It also shows that growing social divisions lead to growing differences in the role distrust plays in political interest representation of social groups and that distrust creates a serious liability for the acceptance of liberal representative democracy.

Distrust: between a requirement and a liability for democracy

Distrust and trust are two conceptually different constructs that need to be treated differently. They have been developed as attitudes, actions, or processes that help the individual to cope with situations of uncertain outcome or vulnerability by reducing complexity in a world we cannot control (van de Walle and Six 2014). Trust includes, therefore, a leap of faith and the expectation that a person (or an institution) will reliably comply and promote one’s own interests. Distrust, in contrast, is not just the lack of trust but ‘an attitude in itself’ (van de Walle and Six 2014, 162) based on the negative expectation that a person (or an institution) seeks to harm one’s own interests and does not accept one’s own key cultural values (Hardin 2002; Ullmann-Margalit 2004). Yet both include the same three bases of origin that, however, are processed differently and lead to either trust or distrust: First, trust or distrust might arise as a consequence of (positive or negative) experience, when people, politicians, or institutions prove to be trustworthy or not (Levi and Stoker 2000). Second, norms and values can promote trust or distrust toward more or less specific entities that are culturally transferred into daily routines (Grande 2000; van de Walle and Six 2014). Third, well-knit social associations and networks shape the way people reciprocally learn and develop social capital and are entangled in reflexive structures or dependencies that induce trust or distrust (Paxton 2002; Putnam 2000). Political distrust would thus be an attitude entailing negative expectations with regard to the trustworthiness of politicians, institutions, or the political system based on experiences made, one’s own norms, and values or the personal networks.

Consequently, scholars have described trust and distrust as concepts that tell more about the societal conditions people live in and the *quality of social systems* (Lenard 2015) than about personality structures of citizens or an individual property (Delhey and Newton 2003; Putnam 2000). Others, however, have emphasized trust and distrust as comparatively stable *individual characteristics* that reflect individual living conditions that are learned in early childhood and can only be slowly altered by severely diverging experiences later in life (see e.g. Erikson 1950).

The implications of *distrust* for democracy have been theoretically developed in conflicting ways. While some scholars develop political distrust as a key component of democratic checks and balances and therefore as a major pillar of liberal representative democracy (Lenard 2015; Hardin 2002), others have underlined the destructive effects of social and political distrust – or mistrust, as some term it – on the functioning

of liberal representative democracy (Nye 1997). On the one hand, democracy might indeed be understood as *institutionalized mistrust* that secures checks and balances on those in power and prevents them from overstepping their competences and maximizing personal gains instead of public well-being (Ullmann-Margalit 2004). As John Keane's diagnosis of a *monitory democracy* puts it, we have entered a phase of democracy where a mistrusting attitude toward those in power and a cautious control of decision-makers in politics, corporations, and civil society organizations have become a cornerstone of liberal representative democracy itself (Keane 2010; van de Walle and Six 2014). Also, people showing low levels of trust are more likely to vote for government change, opposition, or independent candidates in a proportional representation system. This way, distrust is an important ingredient of the democratic alternation of power (Levi and Stoker 2000). In contrast, many scholars have argued that high levels of trust and low levels of distrust between citizens and their representatives should contribute to the functioning of liberal democracy (Lenard 2008). People perceiving their government and their representatives as trustworthy are more likely and willing to abide by the law even if it contradicts their personal interest on the short run (Levi and Stoker 2000).

With regard to the research interest of this article, it is important to differentiate the specific character, foundation, and object of the distrust observed. As Gamson has developed in his classical analysis of *power and discontent* (1968), political trust or distrust can have various objects and can be connected to individual representatives, institutions, the political philosophy of a regime, or even the political community as a whole. When judging the implications for democracy, it makes a huge difference whether distrust is directed toward a single politician or political party which might be removed from power in the next election or whether the distrust is rooted in the belief that the whole set of institutions, political elites, or the political philosophy of a regime is corrupt and cannot be trusted. Knowing if prevailing distrust roots in personal experiences, norms, or social networks helps to understand its consequences for the attitudes toward democracy.

Several scholars have therefore proposed different terminologies concerning these matters: Lenard (2008) makes a difference between *DIS*trust, which is destructive to democracy and encompasses even cynical or suspicious attitudes toward representatives or democracy as a whole, and *MIS*trust, which refers to a vigilant or cautious attitude toward possible violations of individual or fellow citizens rights. Others distinguish between a *particularized trust* (or distrust), which is directed at very specific social groups or individuals based on personal experience or values, and a *generalized trust* (or distrust) which extends to people or groups one does not know in person and based on a general expectation regarding their actions (Dahl 1998; Uslaner 2002; Stolle 2002). This connects to the difference between *bridging* and *bonding social capital* Putnam used to describe varying forms of social relations within society: Bonding is restricted to homogeneous groups of people, whereas bridging refers to relations between heterogeneous groups of citizens (Putnam 2000; Lenard 2008). Since a democracy depends on establishing an accepted consensus beyond bonds of kinship and close social groups, prevailing bonding social capital is likely to undermine a representative system whereas prevailing bridging social capital would – at least theoretically – strengthen it. What all these terminologies have in common is that they try to differentiate forms of trust/distrust that emerge in

smaller, supposedly homogeneous, personally known entities that divide the population into ‘them’ versus ‘us’ from forms of trust/distrust in heterogeneous entities which do not rely on personal relations (Bäck and Christensen 2016).

This article therefore asks (a) for the specific basis of distrust and (b) at which groups, individuals or entities distrust is directed. If forms of distrust lead people to perceive other citizens or institutions in general as harmful and hostile, this would mean a serious liability for the effective functioning of any representative democracy.

Distrust: between mobilizing and discouraging participation

As political participation has been conceptualized as the ‘core venue’ (Vráblíková 2017, 1) through which citizens exert the rule of the people and as the ‘*elixir of life* for democracy’ (van Deth 2014, 350), understanding how distrust influences the willingness to participate can be a good approximation for its effects on democracy (Zittel and Fuchs 2007). If specific forms of distrust lead to declining levels or to changing patterns of participation, this triggers consequences for the acceptance of democratic decision-making if smaller or less heterogeneous groups of people are continuously involved. Yet there is a wide array of conceptualizations that develop conflicting assumptions of possible relationships between the distrust a citizen has in his/her fellow citizens or the democratic institutions and his/her willingness to play an active role in society.

The social capital literature assumes that there is a mutually supportive, positive relationship between a generalized social trust and (political) participation (Uslaner and Brown 2005; Levi and Stoker 2000; Bäck and Christensen 2016). It presumes that people with a generalized trust are more likely to be active in various participation scenarios. Given the experience of participation, they are likely to establish even higher levels of generalized trust. This connects to a large strand in the social science literature, starting from de Tocqueville to Almond and Verba (1963) to Putnam (2000) or Norris (2002). This strand suggests that through associations and formal participation citizens learn and internalize the values and norms of democratic citizenship. Thus, higher levels of generalized social trust play a key role as a trigger for as well as an outcome of participation (Bäck and Christensen 2016; Paxton 2002; Norris 2002). Democracy, in this reading, builds on and fosters its citizens’ democratic actions on the basis of trust. Others have complemented this perspective by stating the other side of the medal: that it is the distrusting who abstain from political or communal participation (Schäfer 2015; Uslaner and Brown 2005).

In contrast, the research on contentious mobilization, social movements, and protest groups within Western societies has categorized political participation as depending on political disaffection and the stimulus of distrust (Levi and Stoker 2000). The influence of distrust on the motivation to participate has been developed especially for unconventional forms of participation or, as some have termed it, *extra-representational participation* (Braun and Hutter 2016). This way, distrust as a root of (political) action motivates repertoires that challenge elites and the political system and have often been considered as illegitimate by parts of the population. Nevertheless, empirical results show that the motivations to engage in alternative forms of participation have changed since the 1960s and 1970s and that demonstrations, protest, and civil opposition are nowadays considered as positive and beneficial to a democratic culture. As an accepted way of

expressing one's political preferences, they are no longer restricted to citizens driven by distrust (Braun and Hutter 2016; Norris, Walgrave, and van Aelst 2005).

Thus, whereas the literature on social capital states that trust activates people to participate, the research on social movements shows that distrust can equally be a key activator. Uslaner and Brown (2005) and Bäck and Christensen (2016) pick up these contradicting conceptualizations and suggest that different forms of (non-)participation are subject to very different causal mechanisms regarding the assumed nexus between trust and participation. Social approval by people we trust might be an incentive to participate, even when voicing distrust against the political system is the main purpose of that participation. Social disapproval, in turn, might discourage (Klandermans and van Stekelenburg 2014; Bäck and Christensen 2016).

The conditionality of distrust mobilization has led to a variety of theorizations of what is needed for a decision to actively take part in: from political interest, the feeling of political efficacy, dissatisfaction with political outcomes, low social inequality levels, higher educational levels, time constraints, to financial resources or social networks (Gamson 1968; Levi and Stoker 2000; Nannestad 2008; Haß, Hielscher, and Klink 2014). As there is still a lack of empirical studies that address the link between distrust and participation (Bäck and Christensen 2016), it is a key research interest of this article to shed light on the contexts, conditions, or resources that make distrust a mobilizing or de-mobilizing factor and on why citizens interviewed in the focus groups were able to become active or not.

Data and methods

In three projects between 2012 and 2016, the authors analyzed different groups in Germany that voiced and signaled political distrust in different ways: citizens organizing protest groups (Walter et al. 2013; Butzlaff 2016), people in neighborhoods where voter turnout had decreased sharply (Blaeser et al. 2016), and citizens of communities where participatory processes did take place but that chose not to participate (Hoeft, Messinger-Zimmer, and Zilles 2017). Amongst other data, all three projects were based on 25 focus group interviews (total approx. 200 people) spread over Germany: urban as well as rural areas, involving different regions, generations, and protest cultures. Participants were recruited during participant observations of activists meetings and on the streets of the low voter-turnout neighborhoods and communities with participation processes. The group discussions were all structured in the same way: they assembled between six and ten participants – that were not necessarily known to each other in daily life but that did share the same values on the issue in question (Krueger and Casey 2009). Focus groups with activists were smaller than with non-voters and non-participants because they tend to be outspoken and self-confident discussants. All focus groups followed a standardized guideline, which ensured a comparability between projects and which included specific questions on the project focus as well as parts where views on the trustworthiness of fellow citizens, civic engagement, politicians, democratic representatives, and the administration were discussed. The task of the team of two moderators was then to ensure an independent and open discussion among participants while still addressing the issues we wanted to focus on. The goal was to intervene as little as possible (Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr 2010).

A merit of focus groups is just that: they carve out universally accepted views, communicative rules, and commonalities of the groups assembled (Puchta and Wolff 2003). It is these commonalities, views and rules that we look for and ask whether activists, non-voters, and non-participants differ in their perspectives on democracy and participation. We present the results organized by the three groups. The transcripts of the 25 focus groups have then been coded and interpreted using qualitative content analysis (Schreier 2014). Coding categories included personal background, values and resources, experiences with civic and political engagement and activism, attitudes toward democracy and perceptions of active and non-active fellow citizens.

The distrusting

The activists

The *activists* interviewed in 13 focus groups throughout 2012 have been organizing civic protest and action groups in rural as well as in metropolitan areas of Germany, and have been addressing a variety of issues: educational reforms, big infrastructure projects such as the enlargement of airports and train stations, projects related to the politics of energy transition such as power lines and wind mills (Butzlaff 2016; Walter et al. 2013). All of the participants voiced a significant amount of distrust directed at the political representatives of established formats of democratic decision-making. All emphasized that their motivation to create or join a civic protest group can be traced back to a feeling that the political system relying on the aggregation of interests in political parties and elected representatives had become ineffective, led to supposedly wrong or destructive results, or had even become corrupt. Several strands of critique to rationalize their distrust could be identified: First, that the system of political parties had led to severe ineffectiveness because of its tendencies to award loyalty and inner-party-logics over issue knowledge and experience. Especially bigger political parties with a broader social scope were perceived not being able to effectively address any policy issue because they were continuously absorbed by maintaining inner-organizational consensus.

...mechanisms within a party simply lead to a situation where a good idea coming from the base will be diluted by the decision-making process [...] at the end, the result will be some tame rubbish about which one says, okay, three lines represent roughly what I meant, but it's all very diluted... (Focus group in Hannover/Germany, 15.03.2012)

Civic protest groups, in contrast, tend to have a comparatively narrow range of issues they address. In doing so, they have often developed a narrowed perspective and despise necessities for societal compromise. It has become their defining test of shortcomings in the system to assess if the political decision-making process arrives at the same conclusion they have drawn.

Second, they were often convinced that representatives within political parties and the bureaucracy are not as well prepared and professionally trained to take well-thought-out decisions. Whereas a protest group can concentrate on their core interest, politicians cannot devote a similar amount of time to the same issue due to the fact that they simultaneously have to cover a wide range of other issues, too. This further fueled their

perception of a representative liberal democracy permanently leading to second best decisions and reflects the fact that within protest groups we find a disproportionately high share of highly skilled and experienced people with a solid income, good social networks, and with a well-developed conviction of political efficacy.

...the reason why I am active is that I have experienced that when I wasn't engaged [...] nothing went ahead. I have a background in local politics and from this perspective, I try to support citizens who would otherwise not dare nor have the skills to get in touch with local politics. I am driven by supporting citizens and by making it possible for them to approach decision-making institutions. (focus group Hannover/Germany, 15.03.2012)

In contrast to the disburdening function of trust brought forward by Luhmann and Sennet, the activists in the focus groups believed *not* trusting made things easier and themselves less prone to frustration. They considered it a sign of political and social maturity not to trust too much outside their social and political vicinity.

Third, in the focus groups, activists often enough showed an understanding of democracy that focused on the capability to ensure an effective output by gathering knowledgeable and informed input and excluding non-informed or unjustified demands. This made themselves and their own efforts for participation valuable for democracy in a normative way but also established a hierarchy of the value of participation between different individuals or groups. The input of less informed or involved parts of the population was viewed less important or even destructive, whereas their own informed and experienced participation on particular issues was considered fundamental. When looking at their perceptions of society and their trust toward other people, it was remarkable that they perceived membership in their civil protest groups as a trust-inducing asset. Given that civil protest groups gather people that share a concern which often enough has become a crucial motivation in their lives – the issue they keep voicing – and that they see as point of departure for their understanding of democracy, they made a distinction between people that have had the same insight into wrong and right and have drawn the same conclusions and people who have not (yet) done so. Not taking action or participating in their struggle was often taken as proof for *not* being aware, knowledgeable, able, or willing and therefore they questioned if the non-active can be trusted in their democratic decision-making capabilities.

After all I don't believe it [direct democracy, note by the authors] is indeed the only true way. [...] we have all seen what happens if everybody can join and take part in decision-making [...], those who are not truly affected and those [...] who have no clue, who just want the issue to disappear... (refers to a lost referendum on the Stuttgart central train station, focus group in Stuttgart, 02.04.2012)

The similarities to the conceptualization of particularized or bonding trust and distrust are obvious as trust within the activists in the focus groups was developed with the strict limitations that someone agrees with the in-group criteria and could therefore be considered as trustworthy (Uslaner and Brown 2005; Stolle 2002). This understanding of trust was expanded to the understanding of democracy. The participation rights they demanded originated in their professional experience and social position and consequently people who lack the same social position or experience were met with distrust. It was a highly particularized trust which additionally reflected the well-developed perception of self-efficacy of a local elite as many of these conflicts were

smaller, more local ones and the protest groups gathered people who considered themselves as experienced and knowledgeable in the local context, in contrast to politicians and representatives at a regional or national level.

They were seeking to influence political decisions because they perceived themselves as having the specific knowledge, experience, and self-confidence to do so and they expected democracy to achieve better-quality decisions if they personally had greater access to the definitions and decisions of the desirable. It was an *individualization of the definition of the common good* based on elitist social positions and voicing distrust toward representatives and processes that could possibly stand in the way.

The non-voters

In contrast, the focus groups with *non-voters* were exactly the sociological opposite. This is in line with what we know about the character and sociology of voting abstention in Germany and elsewhere in the Western democracies (Schäfer 2015). In 2015/2016, six focus groups were conducted in neighborhoods that represented the sociological profile of urban areas where voter turnout had been shrinking sharply since the beginning of the 1980s: neighborhoods with comparatively low income and educational levels, with high unemployment, higher share of people with migrant roots and lower social status (Blaeser et al. 2016).

Democracy – from their point of view – had done little to help in their personal situation and had in contrast led to stigmatization within society and their hometowns. As with the activists, the non-voters underlined how little trust they had in the willingness of the representatives of democracy to change their life for the better – and that they perceived the design of contemporary liberal representative democracy as being responsible for this flaw. Democracy, as voiced in the focus groups, came into their lives only if they were to be exploited as voters in elections without politicians showing interest in their daily life struggles. A widely used illustration was the cynical caricature of party representatives distributing giveaways as the classic German Bratwurst, this way making contact with the electorate only during electoral campaigns. In the view of many in the focus groups, politicians were elitist, self-serving, and irresponsible. Here, they hardly differed from the activists in the previous section.

Those politicians: everyone is just concerned with lining his pocket.

It just always stays the same and doesn't get better. So why? (both Leineberg 24.07.2015)

We found a prevalent distrust in the intentions of politicians not only due to distrust in their personality but also in the party structures and system imperatives that create problematic short-term incentives focusing uniquely on the next electoral approval without caring if campaign promises were kept. As a result, institutions, democracy, and politics did not seem to make any difference – so why be active or vote?

Contrary to the rest of the society by whom they felt disrespected, they did show trust in the behavior of people from their own neighborhood. They shared struggles of daily life as well as the feeling of being excluded on the grounds of their local neighborhood, and this led to a strong sense of communality. They experienced their neighborhood as a societal dead-end limiting their individual life perspectives but at the

same time felt unjustifiably stigmatized and proud of their community. We therefore found a high prevalence of particularized trust in people from the same neighborhood but a serious distrust toward others based on past experiences. This is, however, to be interpreted cautiously because in the focus group discussions it became clear that there was much distrust and fear within the neighborhoods, too (drugs, violence, of being afraid to go out at night, etc.).

...when I go out at night I feel safe. Because I know everybody in the neighborhood. If something happens, somebody will be around immediately. [...] One day a little child disappeared and the mother was crying out loud: 'My kid is gone!' And the whole neighborhood came out and searched for that child. That's how they found it. This solidarity here is special. [...] You can count on the guys. (focus group in Grone, 11.11.2015)

However, what differed remarkably from the activists of protest groups is the fact that non-voters did not believe that their personal voice could change anything – not at the local and even less at higher political levels. They had much less knowledge about how and where to be active and effectively formulate demands within (local) democracy. Non-voters in the focus groups often hardly knew the local representatives or party leaders. They showed a very low sense of self-efficacy and political self-confidence and often did not feel knowledgeable to judge upon political alternatives. At the same time, they had a deep feeling of being exposed to changes in society but of not being in control or able to cope with them. This low sense of self-efficacy had significant demobilizing effects and led to a perception of political engagement as suspicious and mostly opportunistic and selfish. Not least because in the non-voter's perception, political participation and voting was something that was imposed on them specifically by those societal elites who made them feel stigmatized and that benefitted from economic and political decisions to a much higher degree.

Many people feel they are objects to decisions made elsewhere, you know? It doesn't matter what they vote. [...] this is so frustrating, that you say I want to be left alone. It doesn't matter who I vote for, they basically do what they want. (focus group Grone, 09.11.2015)

In this view, participation in representative democracy through voting and political engagement is a behavior elevated to a socially desirable norm that in the end benefits other groups within society. But at the same time, they showed a strong willingness to engage in flexible, small-scale focused, local associations of decisively non-political character. We could therefore see a polarized perception of being active. Participation is trusted only if it is within and for the local community. They did find civic engagement – such as in local sport clubs, children play groups, etc. – very important, they just had the impression that there are far too few opportunities for engagement within their neighborhood and they did not feel self-confident enough to organize by themselves and even less to seek influence on local politics outside their neighborhood.

Furthermore, there were hardly any contact persons left in these neighborhoods which could establish a reliable transmission channel into politics and who could possibly make a potential influence of voting or participation credible. But people did remember that there had been these contact persons in the past: members of local

political parties or representatives of the city council which had been living in their neighborhood. This added to the feeling of being left alone.

In their perception, democracy and democratic engagement – and voting seems to be a part of that – had been taken over by the strong and wealthy. In addition, *through* participation, those groups had increased their knowledge to influence political decisions in their favor. Whereas the political distrust and the highly particularized trust in those perceived close is a similarity between the activists and the non-voters, these patterns root in very different positions and experiences within society. Both differ considerably in their feelings of political self-efficacy. In fact, the confidence in their ability to influence political decisions to their favor could hardly be more diverging. And while the former drew the conclusion that they had to take over representative democracy, the latter have pulled out.

The non-participating

The empirical foundation of the *non-participating* group in this article are six focus groups in 2015/2016 with people who lived in communities where participatory deliberations with regard to power lines, wind mills, and fracking were organized but who remained inactive and did not engage (Hoeft, Messinger-Zimmer, and Zilles 2017). The decision not to participate had very different individual reasons and heterogeneous roots: On the one hand, people chose not to participate because they did not trust in their personal judging and realization capabilities or did not trust the participation mechanisms offered. On the other hand, people satisfied with democratic procedures and representative structures chose not to be active and participate just *because* they trusted in the systems' ability to manage problems in a productive and efficient way (Hanisch and Messinger-Zimmer 2017). Thus, not all non-participation is due to distrust in politics or democracy. It is a much more heterogeneous and diverse group of interviewees compared to the two groups of activists and non-voters focused above.

Whether people showed a trusting attitude toward politicians and representative democracy or whether they were distrustful, suspicious, and dissatisfied with participation opportunities depended on their attitudes toward the issue at stake, toward civil society engagement and the political system in general and – above all – the individual resources to become engaged. Interestingly, discussants that did not show a strict interest in the issue at stake or who even considered the officially proposed policy solution effective tended to trust much more in the established decision-making mechanisms.

Especially the perceived costs to gather the needed information to judge upon the issue and possible alternatives proved important: participatory processes seemed to discourage many of the focus group discussants. Participation in decision-making imposes a pressure on the individual to gather and process the necessary information and to come to a conclusion. Many explained they needed further information on the subject to be able to make a decision and demanded this information from politics and bureaucracy. Yet many participants of the focus groups hardly trusted any additional information provided through official political channels such as the administration, political parties, or representatives. Especially, experts backing the positions of political parties and business companies – in the case of the discussed power lines etc. – were

often confronted with severe distrust and were considered as strongly biased and corrupt. More information does not necessarily lead to trust in the decisions taken if people lack the complexity reduction resources necessary to process the information or trust in the sources providing. In these situations, more information just leads to an overload discouraging engagement.

Even if it is experts telling me [...], I want to see scientific studies. But then, studies can be faked. I do not trust anybody. It is about the money [...] everything else is uninteresting. We do not matter. They have already decided... (Focus group in Homberg, 25.03.2015)

What stood out was that the more an actor was considered to be influential in the political or economic sphere, the less he was trusted. The belief that influence corrupts was clearly visible. This connects to the observation that the locally present citizens' initiatives (which did exist in all cases but which the participants had not joined) were understood to gather authentic people with trustful motives that represent positions and opinions in a democratic way and much closer to the interests of the majority of the citizens. At the same time, they were considered trustworthy exactly *because* they were believed to be powerless. This fits nicely with the concept of trust proxies Mackenzie and Warren (2012) have introduced to conceptualize trust-inducing effects of mini-publics. These can serve as *trusted information proxies* if they match criteria of representativeness, include screens against conflict of interest, notions of deliberativeness, and agreement on the issue. This way, mini-publics can help citizens to manage complex decision-making because they provide informed deliberation in a representative and interest-protected framework that expresses the assumed consensus of the public (Mackenzie and Warren 2012). That these assumptions partly apply to citizen initiatives as well is shown by the fact that from the perspective of the distrusting of the non-participating, the motivations and interests of citizens active in initiatives can be trusted far more than the motives of politicians because of their perceived representativeness and their opposition to vested interests. In a way, these citizen initiatives were perceived as representative mini-publics organizing civic deliberation and voicing public opinion on an issue – and were therefore trusted and led to less individual motivation to become engaged.

Because they [the activists of protest groups, note by the authors] act on their own interests. They want the best for themselves, kids, family, however, not like the politicians or corporations who seek to put the money into their own pockets and make profit. They fight for themselves. (Focus group in Homberg, 25.03.2015)

...but I think on the other hand they [the activists of protest groups, note by the authors] are active, they look after things, that is right. This way, they even represent us who are doing nothing... (Focus group in Altentreptow, 02.07.2015)

In turn, distrust in politicians and established structures of representation seemed to root in a particularized trust, which was restricted to people from the local neighborhood. Any professionalized structure of representation was conceived as corrupting and met with suspicion. Furthermore, many were convinced that beyond any *formal* decision-making process (which they often hardly knew and which to them remained merely simulative), an *informal* network existed that was dominated by higher political or economic strata and which would easily outplay the results of any deliberative

participatory process. So if citizens' initiatives are considered as a trustworthy provider of information, but basically non-influential – why become active?

At the same time, the discussants in the focus groups hardly demanded further influence for citizens' initiatives. They voiced concern that more and direct influence of citizens without democratic control would easily become problematic and could corrupt exactly the motives that made them trustworthy. For many it was the combination of low perceived influence and the local focus that made these initiatives credible and trustworthy – and at the same time did not encourage engagement.

With regard to the implications of the character of distrust of the non-participating for the acceptance of liberal representative democracy, it is important to repeat that not all reservation from democratic participation is due to a fundamental distrust in its actors and principles. There is in fact content and trusting non-participation. Nevertheless, we found a significant level of non-participation that was fueled by a distrust in actors and structures of representative democracy and that came along with a particularized trust on the grounds of geographical, sociological, and ideological familiarity. Often enough, the reason not to engage in participatory mechanisms was linked to (a) a missing belief that the political system was open to their personal input, (b) a doubt they could individually live up to the requirements necessary to participate, and (c) a missing belief that democratic or participatory decisions could be stronger than informal networks of economic and political elites.

What maybe matters most in this sense is that we found considerable distrust in the possibility of political representation mechanisms leading to policy solutions that benefit the majority of the people. Perceptions of society voiced in all focus groups showed a clear suspicion that people would unjustifiably take advantage of the possibility of political influence given to them and that representation without connectivity to local communities was considered highly problematic and leading to worse decisions.

Undermining the preconditions of democratic representation

In this article, we addressed the consequences of current phenomena of distrust in Germany for the attitudes toward representative democracy and for the motivation to engage actively. The activists, the non-voters and the non-participants, all expressed comparatively *high* levels of particularized and within-group trust and at the same time clear signs of political distrust as a negative and at times cynical attitude toward the reality of democratic representation. Yet this did not include democracy as a general principle as virtually all participants of the focus groups considered themselves as true democrats. Coming back to Gamsons' four objects of distrust, we found distrust in all: representatives, institutions, public philosophy, and the political community but less so with regard to a democratic ideal. Many perceived themselves as the defenders of a democratic idea by *not* trusting representative democracy.

However, when people tend to trust only the close and known and regard anyone beyond the social and ideological vicinity with distrust and suspicion, this will have far-reaching implications for any representative democracy as it renders compromise-oriented negotiation of interests all the more complicated (Lenard 2008; Uslander and Brown 2005; Paxton 2002; Stolle 2002). The activists perceived themselves as saving democracy from destructive developments from its inside and clearly limited their trust

to people with the same convictions. This trust in people supposedly better capable of decision-making is the core of their understanding of a true, efficient, and better democracy.

While activists demanded an individualized definition of the common good, the non-voters felt they have no access to its discussion and that it made no sense to claim it. They expressed serious doubts about the democratic reality, too, but in turn considered themselves as (a) excluded and (b) lacking the capabilities to demand participation. In comparison with the activists, they lacked political knowledge, self-confidence, and self-efficacy, and had experienced continuous indifference from political representatives. However, they had built up a certain local pride *within* their neighborhoods rooting in the collective overcoming of adversarial living conditions. The non-participating for their part showed a significant distrust in representative democracy, too, while maintaining a particularized trust toward those they feel akin to. The amount of trust they showed in civil society actors was striking compared to the level of distrust expressed toward political institutions, the administration, or corporations (Hanisch and Messinger-Zimmer 2017).

All groups perceived a significant difference between professional politicians and citizens regarding their trustworthiness and credibility. However, in contrast to the activists, who considered influential citizens (as against influential political representatives) trustworthy if they joined their struggle, the non-participants and the non-voters remained very cautious and highly skeptical with regard to political influence, which they generally considered corrupting. Those are hints for growing social divisions altering the role distrust plays (a) for a democratic interest representation of social groups and (b) for the acceptance of liberal representative democracy. Uslaner (2002) and Nannestad (2008) have emphasized the importance of income equality for the feeling of even-handedness and institutional fairness (Levi and Stoker 2000) which in turn should foster generalized trust in a society. For Germany, the widespread perception of growing inequalities has been well documented (Westle 2015) which not only affected the non-voters' feelings of being socially stigmatized but as well fueled the activists' fear of intensifying social conflicts for fewer resources. The fear of others taking over democracies' decision-making mechanisms to their advantage has been clearly visible throughout the focus groups. The established mechanisms of representation and societal interest negotiation were losing acceptance because for the three groups analyzed here they seemed to yield only weak results compared to the advantages political representatives, the economic realm, or simply other social groups might be able to realize. The fact that activists, non-voters, and – to a certain extent – the non-participants all blame the political institutions and their representatives for much of what is going wrong shows that the perception of institutional arrangements plays a crucial role in shrinking societal trust levels. However, it is questionable if they were to play a central role in any effort to roll back its erosion as social preconditions of prevailing distrust might undermine the acceptance to establish a social consensus. Furthermore, in contrast to large strands of the theory, the people in the focus groups believe *not* trusting makes things easier and them less prone to frustration. Whereas the complexity reducing functions of trust have been well developed, in contrast, flexible capitalist consumer democracies seem to make distrust a complexity-reducing attitude needed to confront the confusing reality of modern life. The recent electoral successes

of right-wing populist parties thrive on exactly this limitation of trustworthy people to the supposedly close and known of a homogeneous national people.

When looking at the relationship between distrust and participation, we found considerable differences rooting already in the case selection: activists engage motivated by their distrust whereas non-voters stayed away because they did not trust in voting as a vehicle of a change for the better. Non-participants in turn did not show such a clear-cut picture, but a considerable number of people interviewed expressed distrust in political decision-making as a motivation *not* to engage in participation opportunities. The perception of system openness and the respective individual resources to meet the requirements of effective participation seem to be the heart of these differences, as the activists expressed much higher levels of political self-confidence, self-efficacy, and political knowledge which they could even increase *through* their engagement (see also Anderson and Tverdova 2001). Non-voters and non-participants in turn are much less convinced that they could make themselves heard through democratic participation or that their personal interests could be subject to democratic deliberation. Striking was that none of the interviewed groups expressed trust in the political system to balance existing social differences in participatory self-efficacy. It therefore came down to the *individual or collective resources* to make use of existing opportunities or to force the political system to listen. If these were at hand, people became active and engaged. If not, as in the case of the non-voters or the non-participants – for example, when they felt unable to trust existing information – people remained inactive or abstained from offered participation channels. This confirms assumptions that trust roots become increasingly individualized as trust levels shrink within a society (Delhey and Newton 2003).

In this sense, the activists engaged in protest groups underlined that the socialization effects proposed by the neo-Tocquevillian literature do not live up to their theoretical claim (van der Meer and van Ingen 2009): The civic organizations of the activists did not turn into the often mentioned *schools of democracy* but instead into pressure groups for the *individualisation of the common good*. If levels of trust within a society have dropped all too low, it seems, associations and civil society can hardly integrate people into a collective and consensus-oriented discourse. The foundations of civil society associations playing a role as an educational framework for the reproduction of democratic norms and values may depend on preconditions they themselves cannot establish.

We therefore found existing distrust not to support a cautious attitude to control democratic representatives and to set boundaries to a potential abuse of power, as Lenard (2008) and others have argued, but instead to weaken preconditions of democratic representation and compromise-negotiation when it leads to an understanding of democracy based on individualized lobbying and/or cynicism. Distrust individualizes the probability to become engaged in civil society or political initiatives, and it changes the role these associations can play for the reproduction of the democratic citizen. Thus, whereas it has been convincingly developed that *not trusting* too much might be helpful to avoid abuse in any democratic society, *prevailing distrust* clearly has strong negative effects for the acceptance of democratic representation and it deepens existing social bias in the willingness to participate.

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