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Social Networking Sites, Personalization, and Trust in Government: Empirical Evidence for a Mediation Model

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Abstract

Political communication via social media might well counter the eroding political trust. In particular, social networking sites (SNS) enable direct flows of communication between citizens and the political elite, thereby reducing social and political gaps. Based on the concept of *personalization of politics*, we argue that interactions with politicians on SNS affect trust in government through a two-step process: First, interactions on SNS make citizens evaluate politicians' characters more favorably. Second, these evaluations serve as cues for the citizens to develop or withdraw trust in government. We test indirect effects using four character traits as mediators: leadership, benevolence, responsiveness, and likeability. A representative online survey ($n = 1117$; in Germany) reveals that interactions with politicians on SNS increase the perceived likeability of candidates, and thus also trust in government. However, they do not affect the evaluation of the other traits: leadership, benevolence, and responsiveness.

Keywords

trust in government, political trust, social networking sites, personalization, interaction with politicians, quantitative survey, mediation effects

Introduction

The eroding levels of political trust since the 1960s have led to a "crisis of political trust" (Zmerli & van der Meer, 2017b, p. 6) in Western democracies. The recent success of populist parties further suggests that political institutions are in dire need of regaining trust to strengthen their legitimacy (Newton et al., 2017; Zmerli & van der Meer, 2017b). The onset of social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram has triggered the hope of renewing people's trust in politics by revitalizing political communication. More specifically, due to their interactivity, SNS are believed to enable direct flows of communication between citizens and the political elite, thereby reducing the existing social and political gaps (Karlsen, 2011; Lee, 2013; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015). Politicians gain new ways of assessing the citizens' wants and needs, which is necessary for responsive political decision-making. Conversely, citizens receive additional cues to evaluate the trustworthiness and professional skills of political personnel based on traits such as leadership, responsiveness, integrity, and competence (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018; Lee & Oh, 2012). However, there is a downside: this personalization of political communication may lead citizens to focus on superficial characteristics such

as physical attractiveness or likeability, making politics a popularity contest. While there is mixed evidence regarding the effects of political SNS use on political attitudes (Boulianne, 2015), the aspect of trust has received little attention. This study fills this research gap by investigating how interaction with politicians on SNS affects citizens' trust in government. For that, we suggest a mediation model and test whether or not citizens' evaluations of four different character traits of politicians (leadership, benevolence, responsiveness, and likeability), which we conceptualize as *specific support* (Easton, 1975), mediate the effect of online interactions with politicians on trust in government, which we conceptualize as *diffuse support* (Easton, 1975). Thus, we advance the study of the relationship between *specific* and *diffuse support* and add empirical evidence on the political effects of social media use.

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Crisis of Trust in Government

The issue of trust has recently attracted much interest in political science (Uslaner, 2017; Zmerli & van der Meer, 2017a) due to the alleged crisis of political trust in Western democracies and the associated detrimental consequences. To illustrate the crisis, scholars primarily point to longitudinal data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) and the European Social Survey (ESS): both show a constant decline of political trust since the 1960s (Hetherington, 2005; Listhaug & Jakobsen, 2017). While this trend may be interpreted as a chance to raise a "new generation of critical citizens" (Marien & Hooghe, 2011, p. 267), most scholars have pointed to the destructive effects of political distrust. It is expected to decrease voter turnout (Grönlund & Setälä, 2007), foster support for populist parties (Pauwels, 2011), and diminish law compliance (Marien & Hooghe, 2011). To counter these challenges, we need to understand the reasons of the decline and develop mechanisms to reverse it.

Before zooming into the key drivers of political trust, it is necessary to disentangle the concept itself. It has been controversially discussed in political science, the main question being: *in what or whom* do people trust when they are said to trust in politics? The literature yields various objects, including presidential incumbents (Citrin & Green, 1986), politicians in general (Bowler & Karp, 2004), the parliament (van der Meer, 2010), national and local governments (Levi & Stoker, 2000), political institutions (Grönlund & Setälä, 2012), and the political system as a whole (Gamson, 1968). This variety of objects stems from the seminal distinction between *diffuse* and *specific* support, as introduced by Easton (1975). This theoretical framework was influential in the conceptualization of political trust as authors (Citrin, 1974; Norris, 2017) commonly distinguish trust in political institutions regardless of performance (*diffuse support*) versus trust in political incumbents (*specific support*).

In this study, we refer to political trust as "a basic evaluative or affective orientation toward the government" (Miller, 1974, p. 952). Thus, this article locates political trust in the realm of *diffuse support* which is placed in the national government. Trust in government, like any other form of trust, is based on expectations (Barber, 1983). It enables citizens to make risky investments in the future by delegating political power to individual political actors whom they do not know personally, or to collective political actors whom they usually know little about (Marcinkowski & Starke, 2018). The basic argument reads as follows: Citizens entrust the authority over state affairs as well as their tax money to political actors without knowing whether those resources will be used responsibly, that is, in accordance with personal or societal hopes and needs (Levi & Stoker, 2000). For citizens to make this risky investment nonetheless, not only legal compulsion but also trust is crucial. That is, citizens base their political actions on "evaluations of whether or not political authorities and institutions are performing in accordance with normative expectations held by the public" (Miller & Listhaug, 1990, p. 358). Following from this, a suitable concept of trust in government needs to specify those normative expectations (Barber, 1983). Miller and Listhaug (1990) argue that trust in government is rarely absolute or blind but rather alludes to context-specific expectations. Thus, citizens do not trust the government in general but rather with respect to specific future actions. In line with "extant research [. . .] using policy outcomes as the implicit object of citizens' trust" (Gershtenson & Plane, 2007, p. 5), we argue that people ultimately place their trust in the outcomes of political decision-making, such as personal freedom, peace, economic wealth, social welfare, and environmental protection (see also Marcinkowski & Starke, 2018). We, therefore, adopt Hetherington's (2005) definition of *trust in government* "as the degree to which people perceive that government is producing outcomes consistent with their expectations" (p. 9). Put differently, trust can be restored if citizens expect the government to deliver on good and effective policies.

Drivers of Trust in Government

To design strategies of regaining trust in government, we must look at its pivotal drivers. First and foremost, citizen's expectations about the government's ability to deliver effective, efficient, and responsive policies are based on prior personal experiences. In other words, trust depends on the perception of past government performance. Yet, attributing the continuous demise of trust in government observed in Western democracies solely to past failures of governments to produce effective outcomes does not do justice to the complexity of this process.

Thus, Listhaug and Jakobsen (2017) point to political distance between the electorate and government elites as a second crucial driver of public distrust. They argue that "the size of political gaps between mass and elite is an important element in political representation, and we assume that political trust declines when gaps increase" (Listhaug and Jakobsen, 2017, pp. 3–4). Following this reasoning, to restore trust in government, it is vital to reconnect citizens with their elected incumbents and thereby narrow the social and political distance. This puts individual politicians in a key position as they serve as intermediaries for citizens to form expectations about institutions such as the government (Bowler & Karp, 2004; Giddens, 1990; Marcinkowski & Starke, 2018).

This core argument is further developed in the concept of personalization of politics which argues that individual political actors become increasingly important at the expense of government performance and policy effectiveness (McAllister, 2007). The consequences of this development are controversially discussed (Marcinkowski et al., 2017; Van Aelst et al., 2012). In a positive reading, personalization enables the electorate to make a more rational voting decision by effectively evaluating the personal aptitude

of candidates in terms of their intelligence, leadership, honesty, integrity, and competence (Bishin et al., 2006). A negative reading suggests that personalization focuses on superficial characteristics such as physical attractiveness or likeability (Anderson & Brettschneider, 2003). In their seminal paper, Mayer et al. (1995) argue that people evaluate a person's trustworthiness based on the three character traits: ability, integrity, and benevolence. Giddens (1990) further argues that "facework connections" (p. 83) with individual political actors serve as "access points" (p. 85) to the more abstract political system. Thus, by evaluating the character of politicians, citizens receive cues about institutions or the political system as a whole. In other words, people's *specific support* is expected to influence their *diffuse support*. For instance, Grönlund and Setälä (2012) find that a positive evaluation of officials in terms of honesty and non-corruptibility leads to more institutional trust. Bjerling (2011), therefore, concludes: "In a time where pragmatic solutions are preferred to ideological rigidity, the reliability and trustworthiness of individual actors will inevitably come to be increasingly important" (p. 7).

Many scholars argue that the complex relationship between citizens and politicians has been fundamentally transformed with the onset of social media (Enli & Moe, 2013). Particularly, SNS triggered the hope of revitalizing political communication. The primary reason for this optimism is that SNS can connect politicians and voters directly, without gatekeepers such as journalists. On one hand, politicians can use SNS to assess the wishes and expectations of voters and subsequently integrate them into the political decision-making process. On the other hand, citizens are provided with additional tools to effectively assess the competence, leadership, or integrity of political candidates. Indeed, the desire to get unfiltered information was shown to be the most important motivation to follow politicians on SNS (Fisher et al., 2019). Along these lines, Kobayashi and Ichifuji (2015) argue that "the evaluation of a politician's personal traits is similar to the impression-driven evaluations that we make in everyday life, and thus they can be made more easily, even by voters with little interest in politics" (p. 576). The following section sheds light on the characteristics of SNS that can reduce the distance between citizens and political elites, discussing their potential to restore trust in government.

Interaction with Politicians on SNS

People increasingly use SNS to obtain political news or to interact with political actors (Kalogeropoulos, 2017; Reuters Institute, 2018). This applies most notably to the United States, but the same tendency can be observed in Europe. The Pew Research Center (2018) Internet Project found that more than 50% of US users have engaged in civic or political activities on SNS. These activities include posting or liking comments on political issues, reposting content of other users or links to political stories, belonging to a group that is involved in political issues, supporting a political cause by changing the profile picture, following politicians or encouraging other users to vote (Pew Research Center, 2018). In Europe, 37% of social media users follow politicians or political parties (Kalogeropoulos, 2017).

SNS such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or YouTube enable users to access information more easily, fostering connectivity between users and providing new opportunities to get involved in politics. Thus, SNS increase the probability for users to interact with politicians directly and/or observe the interaction between politicians and other users passively (Crawford, 2009; Utz, 2009). Those interactions include following politicians on SNS, writing messages to political actors, or observing others interacting with politicians. They provide additional cueing information for the formation of opinions. However, while all SNS share some basic functions such as rating systems and connectivity, they vary considerably in terms of their main purpose or target group. For instance, YouTube is mainly used to share video content, Twitter to share short messages, and Instagram to share photos.

Empirical evidence on the ability of SNS to directly impact whether people expect the government to deliver on good policies—ergo, trust in government—is scarce (Ceron, 2015). However, there is strong evidence that SNS can have indirect effects on trust in government. That is, empirical studies suggest that the use of and the satisfaction with government social media increases citizens' perceptions of transparency which further lead to more trust in government (Kim et al., 2015; Song & Lee, 2016). Taking a similar approach, we draw on empirical evidence to argue that SNS use for obtaining political information influences people's evaluations of political personnel (Kobayashi & Ichifuji, 2015; Lee & Oh, 2012) which then increases citizens' trust in government (Marcinkowski & Starke, 2018).

Personalized communication on SNS offers possibilities for politicians to communicate their positive characteristics to the electorate (Karlsen, 2011). Indeed, users perceive politicians to be more honest on social media than in talk shows and interviews (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018). A study on the 2012 US presidential campaign further found that Facebook use was associated with more positive candidate evaluations (Towner & Lego Munoz, 2016). In a similar vein, Hwang (2013) found that positive evaluations of the Twitter use of Korean politicians improved the attitudes toward them. However, there is also evidence that politicians who use SNS only to broadcast their own agenda, without engaging with users, are evaluated negatively (Lyons & Veenstra, 2016).

Research on self-personalized communication—a focus on the private persona that is often used on SNS—suggests that it evokes higher levels of social presence and parasocial interaction (Lee & Oh, 2012), leading to a higher perceived intimacy with the candidate (McGregor, 2018). People might feel that they have some idea of the intentions,

feelings, and behaviors of candidates who communicate about private matters on social media (Metz et al., 2019). Empirical results from the United States show that 42% of SNS users claim that the internet made them feel more connected to political candidates (Pew Research Center, 2008). Lee (2013, p. 955) further points out that already the "awareness of the interaction potential may foster the illusory perception of face-to-face conversation with the candidate" leading to increased "imagined intimacy." Several studies arrive at a similar conclusion. For instance, Lee and Jang (2013) claim that the immediate interaction and feedback of SNS fosters people's perception of the social presence of political actors. Along these lines, Lee and Shin (2012) find that exposure to a high-interactivity Twitter page heightens the perceived social presence of a candidate—which, as they emphasize, leads to positive user evaluations of politicians in general. Moreover, the opportunity to exchange personalized messages on SNS results in a heightened imagined intimacy with the candidate and thus in more positive evaluations (Lee & Oh, 2012). Zooming in on different character traits, Sundar et al. (2003) suggest that a politician is considered to be more empathetic and sensitive based on the very number of possible interactions. In a similar vein, Bente et al. (2008) argue that both intimateness and co-presence correlate positively with the assessment of competence and trustworthiness. Dimitrova and Bystrom (2013) suggest that following a politician or a political party on Facebook has a positive impact on a user's evaluation of their intelligence and leadership skills.

Passive reception remains the dominant form of political communication in social networks (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015). But even just observing how other users actively interact with politicians also contributes to positive assessments. Even without interacting actively with a politician themselves, users may get an impression of how the politician deals with the questions or posts of other users and what content they share. According to Tanis and Postmes (2003), this form of passive reception enables users to get a richer and more complete impression of the politician as a person. Donath (2007) therefore summarizes, "Seeing who other people know and how they treat and are treated by others provides important cues for understanding them" (p. 235). Crawford (2009, p. 528) describes such passive reception of interactions as "background listening": comments and conversations are perceived passively, without engaging. The effect should not be underestimated: even in this form, the constant flow of information creates a "sense of intimacy and awareness" (Crawford, 2009, p. 528), so that politicians appear more approachable and are seen in a more positive light. By responding to comments posted by users, politicians signal that they are willing to listen to potential voters, which also has a positive effect on their reputation (Utz, 2009).

In sum, we argue that in addition to firsthand experiences with government performance, citizens rely on secondary cues to form expectations about the government's ability to produce effective and desirable outcomes. Above all, those cues include the assessment of individual politicians whom we regard as intermediaries between the electorate and the government. While distance between the citizens and the political elite is likely to foster distrust, a closer connection provides fertile ground for political trust to emerge. SNS equip the electorate with the tools of direct interaction with politicians, which tend to improve the evaluations of their individual characteristics. This study focuses on the four different character traits *leadership, benevolence, responsiveness*, and *likeability*. We derived those traits from the trust model introduced by Mayer et al. (1995) and from the empirical literature investigating the effects of social media use on evaluations of politicians (e.g., Bente et al., 2008; Dimitrova & Bystrom, 2013). First, we adopted *benevolence* from Mayer et al. (1995). Second, we use *leadership* as a proxy to evaluate politicians' ability. Empirical evidence further suggests that the use of SNS improves evaluations of candidates' leadership (Dimitrova & Bystrom, 2013). Third, we argue that *responsiveness* captures the notion of existing political gaps between political leaders and the electorate prominently voiced by Listhaug and Jakobsen (2017). It also addresses the specific nature of interactions with politicians on SNS which ideally lead political elites to adhere to the wants and needs voiced by citizens. Fourth, we included *likeability* because politicians primarily use SNS as a public relations (PR) tool to communicate private information to appear more authentic, approachable, and likable (Enli, 2016).

Thus, our study proposes a novel mediation model. We argue that the more that citizens use SNS to directly or indirectly interact with politicians, the more positively they evaluate political candidates. This fosters belief in the government's ability to produce good policy outcomes, ergo, higher levels of trust. In accordance with the mediation model, we investigate the direct effect of online interaction with politicians on trust in government (H1) as well as the indirect effects of the four different character traits which are conceptualized as mediator variables (H2a–H2d):

H1: Interacting with politicians on SNS positively affects citizens' trust in government.

H2a: Interacting with politicians on SNS positively affects citizens' evaluations of politicians' leadership, which further increases trust in government.

H2b: Interacting with politicians on SNS positively affects citizens' evaluations of politicians' benevolence, which further increases trust in government.

H2c: Interacting with politicians on SNS positively affects citizens' evaluations of politicians' responsiveness, which further increases trust in government.

H2d: Interacting with politicians on SNS positively affects citizens' evaluations of politicians' likeability, which further increases trust in government.

Method and Measures

To test the hypotheses, we conducted an online survey with 1117 German respondents. We collected the cross-sectional data using the online panel Respondi (2016) which recruits panelists both on- and offline.

Sample and Filtering Process

In 9 days in August 2016, we gathered 1329 completed questionnaires. We applied a quota system to match our sample to the German population of internet users ($M = 44.9$ vs $M = 43.7$) in terms of gender (47.1% women compared with 47.6%) and education (37.9% A levels compared with 37.1%), as evaluated by two independent sources (Frees & Koch, 2015; Roßteutscher et al., 2015). On average, respondents needed 14 min to complete the questionnaire. In the first step of data cleaning, we excluded all respondents who completed the questionnaire in less than 5 min. Extensive pretesting indicated that this was the minimum amount of time to read and answer all survey questions thoroughly. In the second step, we excluded respondents who clicked through the item batteries in identifiable patterns. Applying those filtering processes left us with a total of 1117 respondents who were used for statistical analysis. Based on the standards of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, our study achieved a response rate of 0.60 (Response Rate 2, American Association for Public Opinion Research, 2016).

Measures

We constructed one dependent variable, one independent variable, four mediating variables, and several control variables.

Trust in Government (Dependent Variable). Trust in government refers to a person's expectations of the national government's ability to produce favorable outcomes. We measured the dependent variable using the scale suggested by Marcinkowski and Starke (2018). They propose a two-step procedure: First, respondents are asked to rate the favorability of 11 political outcomes encapsulating a variety of policy areas (7-point Likert-type scale, 1 = *not favorable at all*, 7 = *very favorable*): preserve peace in Europe and the world ($M = 6.57$, $SD = 1.00$), protect jobs and economic wealth ($M = 6.21$, $SD = 1.09$), ensure internal security, and public order ($M = 6.40$, $SD = 1.01$), protect the environment and nature ($M = 6.04$, $SD = 1.22$), ensure individual freedom ($M = 5.94$, $SD = 1.19$), reduce social inequalities ($M = 5.99$, $SD = 1.25$), provide sufficient pensions ($M = 6.24$, $SD = 1.13$), integrate

migrants into German society ($M = 4.79$, $SD = 1.96$), accomplish the energy transition ($M = 5.32$, $SD = 1.54$), provide a well-functioning educational system ($M = 6.22$, $SD = 1.06$), and foster European cohesion ($M = 5.07$, $SD = 1.84$).

Four policies that were not rated as highly favorable (average scores of less than 6.0) were excluded from the measurement. In the second step, we asked respondents to indicate their confidence in the German national government to achieve positive outcomes for the remaining seven policies (7-point Likert-type scale, 1 = *not sure at all*, 7 = *very sure*). Ultimately, we formed a mean index using people's levels of confidence about those seven policy outcomes ($\alpha = .94$, $M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.46$).

Interaction with Politicians on SNS (Independent Variable). We used three items to assess the degree to which respondents directly interact with politicians or observe the interaction of other users with politicians on SNS. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they have engaged in the following three online activities over the past 12 months: (1) following a politician on SNS (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram; adapted from Kruikemeier et al., 2014), (2) writing directly to a politician (e.g., via email, Facebook, Twitter, or other platforms such as abgeordnetenwatch.de; adapted from Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012), (3) following online discussions between politicians and other users (adapted from Crawford, 2009). Subsequently, we computed a sum index ranging between 0 (no interaction with politicians on SNS) and 3 (much interaction with politicians on SNS; $M = 0.49$, $SD = 0.79$). A Kolmogorov–Smirnov test for normality reveals that the variable is skewed, $D(1194) = 0.399$, $p < .001$, as only 33.3% of the sample engaged in at least one of the three online activities over the past 12 months. Yet bootstrapping—the method of data analysis used to test the hypotheses—does not require normal distribution of the variable (Preacher & Hayes, 2004).

Evaluations of Politicians (Mediator Variables). To measure evaluations of national politicians, we used eight items from the German Longitudinal Election Study. They measure the following dimensions: leadership (two items, $r = .57$, $p < .001$, $M = 3.02$, $SD = 1.39$, e.g., "Politicians follow up their words with actions."), benevolence (two items, $r = .34$, $p < .001$, $M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.50$, e.g., "Politicians fight for social justice."), responsiveness (two items, $r = .65$, $p < .001$, $M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.44$, e.g., "Politicians consider the opinions of citizens."), and likeability (two items, $r = .73$, $p < .001$, $M = 2.71$, $SD = 1.40$, e.g., "Politicians are likable people."). Respondents gave their answers on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *totally disagree*, 7 = *totally agree*). We constructed four mean indices and used them as mediators in the statistical analysis.

Control Variables. In the analysis, we controlled for factors shown to be influential in other studies on similar research

interests (Hooghe et al., 2011; van der Meer & Dekker, 2011). Political interest was measured using a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *no interest at all*, 7 = *strong interest*) asking for the respondents' interest in German, European, and non-European international political affairs (α = .92, *M* = 4.61, *SD* = 1.62). Satisfaction with democracy (*M* = 4.06, *SD* = 1.80) and perception of the current state of the economy (*M* = 4.63, *SD* = 1.58) were measured via single items on a 7-point Likert-type scale. In addition, we asked about the support for a party currently governing Germany (42% "voted for one of the governing parties") and their social trust (α = .73, *M* = 4.15, *SD* = 1.29) using a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *totally disagree*, 7 = *totally agree*) with three items. We also assessed sociodemographic variables (i.e., gender, age, education, and income) with single-item questions.

Results

To answer our research question and test our hypotheses, we ran ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models using *interaction with politicians on SNS* as the independent variable, *trust in government* as the dependent variable and the four evaluations of politicians (*leadership, benevolence, responsiveness*, and *likeability*) as individual mediator variables.[1] The mediation effects outlined in H2a–H2d were tested using Model 4 of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) add-on PROCESS (Hayes, 2017). PROCESS uses bootstrapping to test indirect effects; unlike other methods (e.g., Sobel test), it does not require normal distribution of the variables in the model (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). Bootstrapping methods can be applied to OLS regression models and structural equation modeling as both types of analysis yield similar results (Hayes et al., 2017). Preacher and Hayes (2004) suggest using 5000 bootstrap samples to generate 95% bias-corrected and accelerated confidence intervals; if the 95% confidence interval (two-tailed) of the respective effect excludes zero, significance of the indirect effects can be assumed (see also Hayes, 2017). We included the aforementioned control variables to test for intervening influences (see Figure 1).

The regression model explains 39% of the variance in trust in government (adjusted R^2 = .39, *p* < .001). In the first step, we look at the direct effect assumed in H1. The results suggest that respondents' interaction with politicians on SNS has no direct significant impact on the dependent variable (*b* = .082, *t* = 1.80, *p* = .072): increased interaction on SNS does not directly increase trust in the national government. We therefore reject H1.

Yet, we find that all four evaluations of politicians' character traits yield small positive effects on the outcome variable; the better respondents evaluate politicians in terms of leadership (*b* = .082, *t* = 3.31, *p* = .001), benevolence (*b* = .074, *t* = 2.38, *p* = .018), responsiveness (*b* = .187, *t* = 5.03, *p* < .001),
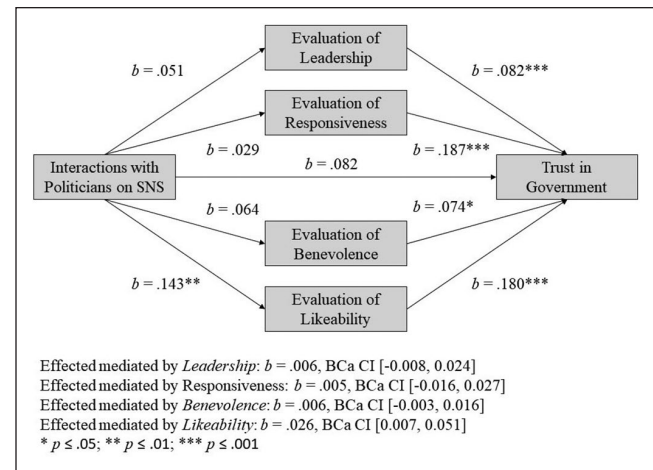
Figure 1. Results of the mediation model testing the impact of *interactions with politicians on SNS* on *trust in government*.

and likeability (*b* = .180, *t* = 4.41, *p* < .001), the more they trust the German government. The results further reveal that several control variables predict the dependent variable: political interests (*b* = −.090, *t* = −3.71, *p* < .001) satisfaction with democracy (*b* = .110, *t* = 4.55, *p* < .001), perception of the economy (*b* = .103, *t* = 3.79, *p* < .001), age (*b* = .005, *t* = 2.09, *p* = .037), and gender (*b* = −.211, *t* = −2.93, *p* = .004). The less the respondents are interested in politics, the better they are satisfied with democracy and the German economy, and the younger that they are, the more they trust the national government. Furthermore, male respondents are more trusting than female ones. However, all direct effects are small in size.

In the second step, we investigate the hypothesized indirect effects addressed in H2a–H2d. We argued that *interaction with politicians on SNS* leads to better evaluations of the four selected character traits, which then increases respondents' trust in the national government. To test this assumption, we used PROCESS to compute four additional OLS regression models with *interaction with politicians on SNS* as the independent variable and each character trait as a separate dependent variable. The results suggest that *interaction with politicians on SNS* only affects the likeability of politicians (*b* = .143, *t* = 2.94, *p* = .003), which in turn increases trust in government (*b* = .180, *t* = 4.41, *p* < .001). Thus, the more respondents directly interacted with politicians online or observed such interactions, the more likable do politicians seem to them. And the more positively the respondents evaluate the likeability of politicians, the more they trust the national government (*b* = .026, BCa CI [0.007, 0.051]). This significant mediation effect supports the assumptions of H2d.

None of the other indirect effects mediated by the evaluations of character traits reaches statistical significance as the confidence interval includes zero: leadership (*b* = .006, BCa

CI [–0.008, 0.024]), benevolence ($b=.005$, BCa CI [–0.003, 0.016]), responsiveness ($b=.005$, BCa CI [–0.016, 0.027]). Thus, the effect of *interaction with politicians on SNS* on *trust in government* is not mediated by the evaluation of any of those character traits. Based on these findings, we reject H2a–H2c.

Discussion

This article suggests an outcome-based concept of trust in government measured via citizens' expectations about future government performance in different policy areas. We argue that interactions with politicians on SNS positively affect this trust via a two-step process. In the first step, people who use SNS to interact with politicians are expected to evaluate character traits of political personnel more positively. This holds to some degree: our online survey suggests that interaction with politicians on SNS only increases the perceived likeability of political personnel—but not their leadership skills, benevolence or responsiveness. In the second step, we argue that such evaluations serve as important cues for citizens to determine whether to trust in government. In other words, more specific support for politicians leads to more diffuse support for the government in general. Our results indicate that this is indeed the case: a positive assessment of each selected character trait increases trust in government.

Implications for Our Understanding of Trust in Government

These findings provide valuable insight into the process of regaining trust in government. Beginning with the second step of our model, trust in government is to a large degree mediated by political elites. That is, citizens view politicians as embodiments of abstract political institutions, and therefore trust or distrust the government according to their evaluations of politicians' character traits. This finding gives further credence to the general assumption in the studies on the personalization of politics that individual political actors become increasingly important (McAllister, 2007; Van Aelst et al., 2012). In this case, they are used as indicators to build expectations about future government performance. This result allows for an optimistic as well as a skeptical reading. Taking an optimistic perspective, it can be interpreted as a fruitful approach to build political trust. It shows that citizens do not blindly trust the government based on their partisan ideology. Instead, they give or withdraw their political trust depending on the assessment of politicians in power. Among those traits we investigated, the likeability and benevolence are slightly more impactful than leadership and responsiveness.

This brings us to the more skeptical perspective which dominates the academic debate. The results of our study suggest that citizens' evaluations of the character traits of politicians play a crucial role in their trust or distrust of government. The growing importance of such personalization of politics is predominantly criticized in the literature because it usually comes at the expense of political programs and processes (Adam & Maier, 2010). Thus, our findings reflect the responsibility of politicians as representatives of the political system: their individual misconduct can reduce trust in institutions such as the national government. The results of our study raise another critical point: A non-political trait, likeability, is more important in building government trust than key political traits. Whereas political character traits such as leadership or responsiveness can serve as fruitful cues to assess the suitability of candidates for public office, likeability seems a superficial trait and thus a questionable foundation for political trust. Critics see this "privatization" or "intimization" as irrational, with detrimental consequences for the public control of the political process (Adam & Maier, 2010). Thus, even though the call for more political trust in widely voiced in the literature (Zmerli & van der Meer, 2017b), our results question whether more trust in government is always desirable. The rising levels of populism in Western democracies illustrate that trust based on personal appeal rather than political programs, processes, or decisions may undermine democratic stability (Kriesi, 2015). Therefore, to determine the democratic value of trust in government, it might be fruitful to look beyond citizens' general levels of trust and focus more on their reasons for trust. In other words, the merits of trust in government may not only lie in its quantity, but also in its quality. This approach could inform both theoretical and empirical future research on trust in government.

Implications for Our Understanding of Political Communication via SNS

This study further shows that interactions with politicians on SNS indirectly influence the trust in government by increasing their likeability. This result supports the claims made by multiple authors cited in this article that SNS serve as an important tool for politicians to create a sense of closeness (Kobayashi & Ichifuji, 2015; Lee & Oh, 2012; McGregor, 2018). By enabling dialog between politicians and citizens, the connectivity of SNS can contribute to countering the eroding political trust. Direct and also indirect interactions can decrease social distance as users feel that they get to know political leaders as individuals when seeing them in a private setting without filters or at least with fewer filters compared with traditional media coverage. However, more empirical research that goes beyond using cross-sectional data is needed to investigate which forms of interaction (direct vs indirect), which SNS (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube) and which communication style contribute to this sense of closeness. While this study investigated the most relevant SNS collectively, it

is reasonable to assume that different SNS have different effects on citizens' evaluations of politicians' character traits, be it due to their specific features (e.g., written content, visual content, audiovisual content) or their primary target group. For instance, a video recorded in a politicians living room might contribute more to their likeability than a written message.

A more critical reading questions the authenticity of these new forms of interaction, arguing that professional political PR has simply adapted to the changing demands of social media communication (Enli, 2016). Arguably, portraying oneself as approachable is just a communication strategy to gain electoral success, irrespective of the benefit for the voters. We find some support for this claim: interacting with politicians online does not improve the evaluation of political character traits such as leadership or responsiveness. The lacking increase in perceived responsiveness in particular suggests that online interactions do not give citizens the impression that their voices are heard or sufficiently represented in political decision-making. Instead, they just make politicians to appear more likable. This finding questions the widespread idea of SNS as the panacea in political communication. Yet it also calls for more research to determine which forms of strategic online communication can be used by politicians to not convey only their likeability but also their professional abilities, which proved to be important cues for citizens to develop or regain trust in government. In a similar vein, future research should explore which on- and offline sources citizens use to form their opinions about political character traits of politicians such as leadership, responsiveness, or benevolence. On this note, we need to acknowledge that our empirical design only investigates four character traits of politicians: leadership, responsiveness, benevolence, and likeability. We do not claim that this list is exhaustive, but rather assume that other traits such as honesty also need to be considered as important drivers of trust in government (Grönlund & Setälä, 2012).

Conclusion

As eroding levels of political trust provide fertile ground for populism, regaining trust in government becomes crucial. This article sheds light on the process through which direct and indirect interactions with politicians on SNS affect trust in government. In a nutshell, people who use social media to interact with candidates develop a sense of closeness and evaluate those candidates as more likable, which increases their trust in the government. Yet social media communication does not influence the perceptions of other —arguably more relevant—character traits such as leadership, benevolence, and responsiveness. By highlighting the importance of individual actors in indicating the trustworthiness of the government, this study adds to the research on the personalization of politics. Furthermore, it provides empirical evidence that social media does not fundamentally revitalize political

communication. Rather, its focus on interactivity contributes to a sense of social closeness between the political elite and the citizens.

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Note

1. As the variance inflation factor (VIF) for all variables is lower than 5, there is no reason to assume biases caused by multicollinearity (Field, 2013).

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