**How do Citizens Evaluate Politicians?**

**The Role of Performance and Expectations in Shaping Political Trust**

This article examines how citizens judge the trustworthiness of public officials, focusing on one aspect of the cognitive process by trust is assessed. It considers how far trust reflects not only the perceptions of how politicians behave but also prior expectations of that behaviour. ‘Expectancy-disconfirmation’ models suggest that attitudes to public services are largely shaped by performance perceptions adjusted for expectations. Drawing on survey data from a sample of citizens in the UK, the paper finds results that are inconsistent with this model. Instead, trust is found to primarily reflect performance perceptions alone; expectations play little additional role in shaping citizen evaluations. The results suggest that policy makers are unlikely to boost levels of political trust by reducing what citizens expect of politicians. Instead, policy makers concerned to improve their public image will have to undertake the harder task of improving their performance.

Keywords: Political trust; Attitudes to public officials; Political conduct; Performance; Expectations*.*

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How do citizens decide whether public officials and institutions should be trusted or not? Attempts to answer this question have tended to focus on two aspects of the way citizens evaluate political actors. The first aspect relates to the criteria employed in trust judgements, namely the type of considerations that citizens draw on in assessing the trustworthiness of actors. The second aspect relates to the processes that underpin these evaluations, namely the ways in which information or perceptions are used by citizens to reach summative trust judgements. Empirical analyses of political trust have concentrated on the first aspect, being concerned primarily to identify the type of criteria or considerations that drive trust (eg. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1995, 2001; Dalton, 2004; Norris, 2011; Zmerli and Hooghe, 2011). Less attention has been paid to the second aspect, the mechanisms by which assessments and perceptions are processed in generating an overall trust judgement. These processes are the focus of this article. In particular, I examine whether trust in political actors primarily reflects citizens’ perceptions about how well those actors have performed, or whether trust also reflects a more complex, relational, judgement, in which perceived performance is considered alongside the expectations that citizens have of that performance. Various studies of citizen attitudes towards public services and political actors have suggested that levels of satisfaction are better explained by the performance of those bodies relative to prior expectations than by performance alone. These studies provide a more thorough picture of the cognitive processes employed when citizens evaluate the trustworthiness of political actors. The contribution of this article is to explore whether this picture provides a realistic account of how trust evaluations are made.

Adopting a definition used in the field of management studies, we can think of trust as reflecting “The willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party” (Mayer et al, 1995: 712). This definition encapsulates the trust that someone might have in their fellow citizens as well as their trust in organisations, but in this article I am interested in the latter (political) aspect of trust rather than the former (social) aspect. In William Gamson’s simple, but widely cited, definition, political trust represents the “probability … that the political system (or some part of it) will produce preferred outcomes even if left untended” (Gamson, 1968: 54). Trust therefore represents a judgement that, even in the absence of ongoing scrutiny or enforcement by citizens, a political actor or institution will act in a way that is broadly consistent with those citizens’ interests.

It has long been recognised that trust in an agent may reflect not only how that agent performs – or is perceived to perform – but also what level of performance is expected of that agent.[[1]](#endnote-1) The central role of expectations is suggested in Miller’s definition of political distrust, which represents “the belief that the government is not functioning and producing outputs *in accordance with individual expectations*” (Miller, 1974, p.952; emphasis added). Hibbing and Theiss-Morse stress the same considerations when they suggest that distrust arises from a sense among citizens “that something *should be* happening but is not happening” (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1995, p.55; emphasis added). More specifically, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse identify distrust as the consequence of high public demands or expectations – fuelled, as the authors note, by politicians themselves as well as by the media – that are not met by the outputs of the political process. Indeed, numerous scholars have suggested that the reason for the recent decline in political trust across many advanced democracies lies less with poor economic and political performance on the part of governments than with rising expectations among citizens, that run ahead of governments’ capacity to deliver (Orren, 1997; Cooper, 1999; Miller and Listhaug, 1999; Dalton, 2004, chs5-6).

Complementing conceptual perspectives, recent empirical studies have suggested that citizens’ attitudes to public bodies are, indeed, shaped by expectations of those bodies. Thus, citizen satisfaction with local public services – such as refuse collection and road maintenance – in the United States and Britain has been shown to be sensitive not only to how well those services are perceived to be delivered, but also to how well performance meets the standards expected by citizens (James, 2009; Morgeson, 2013; Poister and Thomas, 2011; Roch and Poister, 2006; van Ryzin, 2004, 2006). Recently, Curtice and Heath (2012) have shown that satisfaction with the National Health Service in Britain is shaped by the degree to which people’s perceptions of the degree of patient choice matches the degree of choice they expect. But these studies have focused mainly on citizens’ attitudes towards public services; there has been less concern to explore what role expectations might play in shaping levels of satisfaction with, or trust in, core political actors. One exception is Kimball and Patterson’s (1997) analysis of US citizens’ approval of Congress. This study reached a similar conclusion to the analyses of reactions to local service providers; that satisfaction – with Congress in this case – is more powerfully explained if citizens’ expectations of performance are considered alongside their perceptions of performance than if performance perceptions are considered alone. However, this study focused specifically on the US legislature, and the behavioural qualities used as measures of perceptions and expectations related mainly to quite particular political attributes (such as ‘supporting the President’) and professional qualifications (such as ‘being trained in legal work’).

More generally, we might wonder whether citizens have strong expectations of political actors that shape their levels of trust and satisfaction? Citizens may hold clear expectations about the quality of particular public services – like refuse collection and road maintenance – that shape their degree of satisfaction with service providers. But do citizens hold similarly clear expectations of politicians and governments, and are these expectations sufficiently well-formed to affect levels of trust and satisfaction? In this article, I examine how far popular trust in public officials in the United Kingdom reflects perceptions of how well these actors are seen to perform set against expectations of performance. My source is survey data collected in 2008 that records UK citizens’ attitudes towards politicians. The survey contains measures that tap perceptions of politicians’ behaviour, along with measures of the conduct that citizens expect of these actors. These data allow me to explore whether citizens’ trust in politicians is dependent primarily on perceptions of performance, or whether expectations also affect trust, by qualifying perceived behaviour. I begin by outlining the role of expectations and identifying how expectations might relate to performance perceptions in shaping trust judgements. I then set out the data used to test the hypotheses, before presenting the empirical results. The headline finding is to call into question the role of expectations; instead trust appears to be shaped more straightforwardly by performance perceptions alone. The wider significance of this finding is considered in the concluding section. In particular, if trust is not significantly shaped by citizens’ expectations, it becomes doubtful whether politicians will be able to bolster their public image by reducing the expectations that citizens hold of their elected representatives.

**Expectations and their role**

There are a number of ways of thinking about the expectations that an individual might have of a product, an organisation or another person (Oliver, 1997, p.70), of which two dominate the conceptual and empirical literature. The first sense of expectation relates to an anticipatory judgement; a belief that an actor or body *will* deliver a particular quality or outcome. The second sense relates to a normative or desirability judgement; a belief that a particular quality or outcome *should* be delivered (Spreng and Page, 2003). Empirical studies of attitudes to politicians and public services have drawn on both types of expectations, although most have operationalised expectations in the normative sense, relating to qualities or outcomes that citizens believe should be manifested (Kimball and Patterson, 1997; James, 2009; Poister and Thomas, 2011).[[2]](#endnote-2) This study similarly treats expectations as desired outcomes or patterns of behaviour. Thus, political trust is held to reflect the perceived performance of politicians relative to the outcomes or forms of behaviour that citizens value or desire.

The literature identifies three different approaches to the relationship between perceptions and expectations in shaping trust judgements. The first sees attitudes towards an object as reflecting a belief that the object possesses a particular characteristic adjusted for the value attached to that characteristic. The ‘expectancy-value’ approach computes trust in terms of the object’s manifestation of an attribute multiplied by the importance attached to that attribute (Fishbein, 1967).[[3]](#endnote-3) The second approach takes expectations as adjusting perceptions by acting as a denominator to them (Orren, 1997, p.86).[[4]](#endnote-4) However, employing expectations as a divisor seems computationally demanding for citizens. The third approach treats expectations as a subtractive term to performance perceptions.[[5]](#endnote-5) In this ‘expectancy-disconfirmation’ model, expectations serve as a standard against which performance perceptions are compared, with any discrepancy between the two shaping attitudes towards the object being evaluated (Oliver, 1980; 1997, ch4). Where perceived performance matches expectations, no discrepancy exists and there is no aggregate effect of performance and expectations on attitudes towards the object. Where perceived performance exceeds expectations, a positive discrepancy exists that induces a positive attitude towards the object; correspondingly, perceptions that fall short of expectations yield a negative discrepancy triggering negative attitudes towards the object. The expectancy-disconfirmation relationship between perceptions and expectations has been the dominant approach among studies seeking to explain attitudes to public services or officials (Curtice and Heath, 2012; James, 2009; Kimball and Patterson, 1997; Morgeson, 2013; Poister and Thomas, 2011; Roch and Poister, 2006; van Ryzin, 2004, 2006). I therefore employ this approach in exploring how citizens judge the trustworthiness of political actors in Britain, and in particular the role that expectations play in shaping these trust judgements.

Having outlined the basic model, I should note a couple of potential objections to it. One such relates to the variables employed in the model. Relationships between these variables may turn out to be weak if the perceptions and expectations drawn on fail to capture the criteria that citizens actually employ in evaluating the trustworthiness of political actors. Craig (1993, pp.42-3) has forcefully stressed the need to measure perceptions and expectations of government that are salient to citizens rather than these simply being assumed by the researcher (see also Fishbein, 1967, p.395). Fortunately, the survey measures on which this analysis rests were informed by prior research – based on focus group analysis – that sought to identify the specific criteria employed by British citizens in assessing public officials (Graham et al, 2002).

A second objection concerns the model’s hypothesised causal relations. The assumption is that trust is a consequence of perceptions and expectations, but trust may in fact be endogenous (Van de Walle and Bouckaert, 2003). Even if this is not the case[[6]](#endnote-6), any empirical relationships between perceived behaviour, expected behaviour and trust may be artificially inflated if survey respondents adjust their stated perceptions or expectations to align with their stated level of trust. In the survey drawn on here, respondents were asked first for their level of trust in various public officials, followed by their expectations of politicians’ behaviour, and then for their perceptions of how politicians actually behave. The proximate positioning in the survey of these three core measures runs the risk of some contamination of responses, either in the form of response ‘assimilation’ or response divergence or ‘contrast’ (Oliver, 1997, pp.100-3). Although the differences recorded in the survey (see below) between people’s expectations of politicians and their assessments of politicians’ actual behaviour suggest minimal assimilation effects, we cannot rule out the potential for some error in the measurement of the core variables, arising from overlap between respondents’ perceptions and expectations of politicians’ behaviour and their stated levels of trust.

**Data**

Analysts seeking to explore the nature and effects of public expectations of politicians are hardly confronted with an abundance of ready data, either in Britain or elsewhere. Only a few surveys in Britain have measured popular expectations of politicians, among them the ‘Public Attitudes Towards Conduct in Public Life’ survey, sponsored by the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL), an independent oversight agency. This survey was conducted in 2003-4, 2006, 2008, 2011 and 2012. The data I draw on here are from the 2008 survey. The advantage of this source is that it measures trust not only in binary form, but also in the form of a four-point ordinal scale.[[7]](#endnote-7) Empirical studies conducted in the US (eg. Gershtenson and Plane, 2007) suggest that measuring trust using multiple response categories yields more discerning results than indicators with few response categories. Thus, since the ordinal measure of trust is likely to provide more discriminatory power than the binary measure, I use data from the 2008 survey in this analysis.

The data were collected using a multi-stage stratified random sample, based on people aged 18 and over, conducted face to face in respondents’ homes. Fieldwork was conducted across the UK between January and May 2008, achieving a response rate of 57.2 per cent (for technical details of the survey, see Hayward et al, 2008, pp.112-16). During that period, a few incidents of financial misconduct concerning parliamentarians achieved national prominence, notably furores over Derek Conway MP and the speaker of the House of Commons, Michael Martin (see Hayward et al, 2008, pp.106-7). These events might be thought to introduce some bias to the results, principally by increasing the salience of financial probity in citizens’ assessments of politicians’ performance. However, the focus for this analysis lies in the discrepancy between expectations and perceptions, and it is not clear that changes in the relative salience of particular aspects of performance would affect this relationship. In particular, while incidents of financial misconduct might serve to lower assessments of politicians’ performance, they might also dampen down expectations of that performance, yielding no overall effect on disconfirmation levels. In short, it is not clear that the timing of the data collection seriously biases the results presented here.

The empirical analysis is based on four key variables: trust, expectations of political behaviour, perceptions of political behaviour and a disconfirmation measure. The dependent variable derives from a question on how much respondents trust various political actors to tell the truth, measured on a four point ordinal scale (from ‘do not trust at all’ to ‘trust a lot’). This measure of trust is admittedly quite specific and so might tap only one particular aspect, or domain, of trust, namely politicians’ honesty. Unfortunately, no other measures of trust were fielded on this survey, precluding any comparison between the results obtained for the truthfulness aspect of trust and those for other aspects of trust. There are, however, good reasons for thinking that truthfulness constitutes a central aspect of trustworthiness. Studies of attitudes towards the conduct of public office holders in Britain (Graham et al, 2002, pp.41-42), as well as quantitative analyses of the dimensions of trust in other countries (eg. Butler, 1991; Frewer et al, 1996; Metlay, 1999; Earle, 2010; see also Johnson, 1999), point to the importance of considerations of truthfulness for trust. Indeed, empirical studies that employ multi-item scales to measure trust often find that honesty comprises one of its core elements (eg. Egede and Ellis, 2008). Thus, there are solid grounds for treating the measure drawn on here as tapping a generalised aspect of trust, and not simply the narrower domain of truthfulness. As such, it is also reasonable to explore the impact on this measure of trust of expectations and performance perceptions that tap various forms of political conduct.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Expectations are measured by the importance that respondents attach to ten different standards of behaviour among politicians. These standards – which, as noted, were derived from earlier qualitative research that identified behavioural practices deemed to be particularly important by members of the public (Graham et al, 2002, pp.23-44) – include dedication to public duty, financial probity and competence, honesty and transparency, truthfulness, responsiveness to public concerns and integrity in personal behaviour. (Not all of these expectations are used in the modelling, with some omitted for methodological reasons which are explained below.) For each behavioural standard, the survey respondents were asked how important they believed it to be that Members of Parliament (MPs) and government ministers[[9]](#endnote-9), jointly, manifested the quality, with responses recorded on a five point scale (from 1=not at all important to 5=extremely important). Perceptions were measured by questions on how many MPs and government ministers, separately, are believed to actually meet these behavioural standards (with responses measured on a five point scale, from 1=none to 5=all). Since the same set of behavioural standards are measured as expectations and as perceptions, and since both are measured on identical five point ordinal scales, it is easy to generate a disconfirmation variable by subtracting expectations from performance.[[10]](#endnote-10) In the analysis presented below, I focus on the results for government ministers – since performance perceptions for these actors are slightly lower than those for MPs, creating more of a gap between expectations and performance – although I also note the results if we focus on the performance of MPs.

**Results**

I begin by reporting the standards of behaviour that citizens expect of politicians, and the perceptions that citizens have of politicians’ actual performance.[[11]](#endnote-11) Respondents were first asked how important they felt it was for MPs and government ministers to behave in particular ways. Given that the measures reflect desired, rather than anticipated, standards, it is not surprising that expectations are skewed towards the high end of the scale (Table 1). Across six of the ten types of behaviour, more than sixty per cent of respondents indicated that the conduct was ‘extremely’ important. For just a single type of behaviour – setting a good example in one’s private life – did more than one quarter judge the conduct to be at best only ‘quite’ important.[[12]](#endnote-12)

TABLE 1

Respondents were then asked how many government ministers actually met these behavioural standards. If we focus on the balance of responses – the proportion of respondents perceiving ministers to meet these standards minus those perceiving ministers to fall short of the standards – then Table 2 shows that citizens were positive on some aspects of behaviour (such as avoiding personal enrichment, public regardedness and competence), although more negative on other forms (such as admitting mistakes, explaining decisions, being in touch with the public, telling the truth and wise use of public funds).

TABLE 2

Although ministers are seen to perform quite well on some aspects of behaviour, overall their performance fails to meet the behavioural standards expected by citizens. We can see this by calculating disconfirmation measures, which adjust perceptions by expectations. These scores are shown in Table 3 in the column marked ‘Difference’, which represents the mean score for each behavioural perception minus the mean score for the equivalent expectation. Relatively modest negative disconfirmation scores may represent low expectations (eg. setting a good example in private), but when behaviour is perceived to be poor, even relatively low expectations can result in strongly negative disconfirmation scores (eg. owning up to mistakes). Similarly, high expectations can be matched by relatively good perceptions, yielding a modest negative disconfirmation score (eg. not taking bribes) or, alternatively, by poor perceptions, yielding a strong negative disconfirmation score (eg. telling the truth). Irrespective, in all cases, expectations outstrip perceptions, meaning that the disconfirmation score for each form of behaviour takes a negative value.

TABLE 3

How do perceptions of performance, in themselves and combined with expectations in the form of a disconfirmation variable, affect levels of trust in politicians? I begin by analysing the relationship between performance perceptions, disconfirmation and trust in government ministers in bivariate form. Since the dependent variable poses as its referent ministers’ tendency for truthfulness, I omit the measure that taps perceived performance and expectations of politicians’ proclivity to “tell the truth”. For the remaining nine forms of conduct, the correlation coefficients reported in Table 4 are not particularly strong, indicating that trust in government ministers is only partly shaped by expectations and perceptions of political conduct. The variation in the figures also suggests that different aspects of conduct have different effects on trust; for some aspects of conduct, performance and expectations have a much stronger impact on trust than for others. But the key test is a comparison of the two columns, which suggests a stronger relationship between trust and performance perceptions alone than between trust and the expectations-performance variables. In all cases bar one – giving reasons for a decision – the correlations for the performance perceptions are stronger than the correlations for the disconfirmation measures.[[13]](#endnote-13) At first glance, then, it does not appear that levels of trust are affected more strongly by expectations-adjusted assessments of performance than by assessments of performance alone.

TABLE 4

However, citizens’ expectations and performance perceptions are often held to generalise across different forms of public service or different aspects of political conduct, rather than being specific to particular service forms or aspects of conduct. In addition, assessing attitudes to public services or to politicians through single item indicators is more prone to measurement error than if multiple measures, tapping some underlying concept, are employed (Zeller and Carmines, 1980: 48-52; Heath and Martin, 1997). For this reason, tests of the expectations-disconfirmation approach have often modelled expectations and performance perceptions as multi-item latent variables which tap generalised attitudes towards a service (eg. Van Ryzin, 2004, 2006). To ensure that the impact on trust of expectations and performance perceptions does not differ when we move from individual aspects of political conduct to more generalised assessments, I model the same relationship as before, but using multiple measures of performance perceptions and expectations, in latent form.

The two models I employ test the relationship with trust in government ministers of two latent variables, the first tapping performance perceptions and the second performance perceptions adjusted for expectations in the form of a disconfirmation term. The latent variables are held to define just seven aspects of political conduct, since models based on all of the nine aspects of conduct set out in Table 4 are found to provide a poor fit to the data.[[14]](#endnote-14) The models therefore omit the variables relating to using power to make personal gain and using power to take bribes. The remaining seven forms of conduct are included in the latent performance measure and, as both performance and expectations, in the disconfirmation measure (descriptive statistics for the variables are given in Appendix 1). Parameter estimates are obtained through structural equation modelling, using maximum likelihood estimation, employing the Amos software programme (the full models are set out in Appendix 2). The results are similar to those obtained for the individual measures of behaviour reported in Table 4, albeit that the relationships are rather stronger, reflecting the fact that the measures tap multiple aspects of political conduct. The standardised coefficient between the (seven item latent) measure of perceived performance and trust in government ministers is 0.45 (p<0.001). The coefficient with trust of the equivalent disconfirmation measure is slightly weaker, at 0.41 (p<0.001).[[15]](#endnote-15) These results are robust to the introduction of some basic controls, covering age, education and party support.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Thus, whether we employ attitudes towards specific or to general aspects of political behaviour, the results are consistent: trust in government ministers is more strongly affected by perceptions of how well those actors are seen to perform than by perceptions modified by prior expectations. Moreover, if we extend the analysis from trust in government ministers to trust in MPs, the results are almost identical.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Thus far, the assessment of the impact of performance perceptions and expectations on trust has assumed that expectations operate as a subtractive term to performance. But, as noted earlier, there are alternative approaches, one of which treats expectations as a value attached to an attribute of a service, serving as a multiplicative term to performance perceptions. The ‘expectancy-value’ approach thus computes trust in terms of the object’s manifestation of an attribute multiplied by the importance attached to that attribute. Expectancy-value has been used to predict levels of trust in various organisations in Sweden (Viklund and Sjoberg, 2008) as well as environmental management bodies in the United States (Johnson, 2010).

To test whether this specification of expectations fares any better in shaping levels of trust in government ministers, I re-estimate the structural equation model using the ‘expectancy-value’ approach in place of the ‘expectancy-disconfirmation’ approach (so for each aspect of political conduct, perceived performance is multiplied by the importance attached to that conduct). However, this new model performs worse than the expectations-disconfirmation approach in predicting trust. Whereas the correlation with trust in government ministers of the expectations-disconfirmation term was 0.41, the equivalent correlation using the expectancy-value model is slightly weaker, at 0.34. It seems that, if expectations do qualify performance in shaping trust in political actors then, in Britain at least, they do so more by serving as a baseline against which performance is compared (ie. a subtractive relationship) than by providing a value attached to performance (ie. a multiplicative relationship).

The analysis so far has tested the relative effects of performance and expectations on trust in political actors, measuring performance perceptions and expectations both in relation to individual aspects of political conduct and across multiple aspects of conduct. The analysis has also tested different forms of the relationship between performance and expectations. The results across these different tests consistently suggest that performance matters for trust on its own, independently of any reference to prior expectations. In one final test of the role of expectations, I examine whether trust in politicians might be particularly corroded among citizens holding very high expectations of political behaviour, as suggested in James’ (2009) ‘expectations-anchoring’ model. To explore this possibility, I examine levels of trust in government ministers by perceptions of how well they have performed, dividing the results into two groups: those holding very high expectations (ie. judging the form of political conduct to be ‘extremely important’) and those with lower expectations (ie. judging the conduct to be at best ‘very important’; recall from Table 1 that the numbers judging a conduct to be ‘not at all’, ‘not very’ or even only ‘quite’ important often comprise no more than 8 per cent of the total sample, making further breakdowns of these numbers difficult). Table 5 shows mean levels of trust for people who perceive political performance to be poor (in that ‘none’ or only ‘a few’ ministers are seen to manifest the behavioural quality) and for people who perceive performance to be good (with ‘most’ or ‘all’ ministers seen to act virtuously). Within each of these performance categories, levels of trust are shown for those with high expectations and for those with modest/low expectations. If expectations do serve as an important reference category for performance perceptions, then we should find that levels of trust vary substantially *within* each performance category (ie. between those with high and modest/low expectations), with the degree of variation being as great as, or greater than, that *between* performance categories.

TABLE 5

In fact, no such finding is apparent. True, expectations do matter. Among those people who judge performance to be poor, levels of trust are consistently lower among people who hold high expectations of ministerial conduct than among people who hold rather lower expectations. Thus, for example, among those who judge ministers to perform poorly in relation to being ‘dedicated to the public good’, mean levels of trust (measured on a four point scale with 1 equating to low trust and 4 equating to high trust) are 1.89 among people holding high expectations of ministerial responsiveness, while rather higher, at 2.11, among those holding lower expectations. Only for one form of conduct – the wise spending of public money – are levels of trust not depressed by high expectations. However, the impact of expectations is less pronounced among those who perceive ministers to be performing well. Here, levels of trust are often as great, or even greater, among people holding high expectations of conduct as among those holding lower expectations. So prior expectations do affect levels of trust in politicians, but primarily where performance is deemed to be poor; in these cases, holding high expectations does appear to have some effect in depressing trust.

More important, however, we see that the most substantial differences in levels of trust are not between those holding either high or low expectations, but between those perceiving performance to be either good or poor. Hence, trust varies by more between the ‘poor’ and ‘good’ performance columns than it does within each of these categories between the ‘high’ and ‘modest/low’ expectations. To illustrate this point, we can see from Table 5 that, for a given level of perceived (poor) performance on being dedicated to the public good, mean levels of trust vary by expectation from 1.89 (among those holding high expectations) to 2.11 (among those holding modest or low expectations), for a total ‘trust gap’ of 0.22. But if we hold expectations constant and vary perceived performance, this gap widens considerably. So, among those people who hold high expectations that politicians will be ‘dedicated to the public good’ and who perceive ministers to meet these standards, mean trust is 2.66, but among those holding the same high expectations but who perceive ministers to perform far worse, mean trust is just 1.89, yielding a trust gap of 0.77.[[18]](#endnote-18)

**Conclusions**

Among recent studies of popular attitudes towards public services and political institutions, the dominant wisdom is that citizens’ evaluations – whether measured in terms of satisfaction or trust – are shaped not so much by how well those services or institutions are seen to perform, as by how well that performance relates to prior expectations. That citizens’ evaluations might be based on expectations as well as on perceptions of performance is intrinsically plausible: two people perceiving the same standard of service from a public body may judge that body very differently depending on the standard of service they expected. The intrinsic plausibility of the role of expectations in qualifying performance perceptions is also supported by empirical analyses which suggest that performance adjusted for expectations has a stronger effect on satisfaction than performance perceptions alone. Yet the findings reported here suggest that public assessments of political actors are driven primarily by the perceived performance of those actors, with expectations playing a distinctly secondary role. What might explain this discordant result?

There are, I think, three potential explanations to deal with. One straightforward explanation is that the analysis reported here is of attitudes towards different political actors than those covered in previous studies (ie. politicians in the UK as opposed to public service providers in the US) and draws on a different sample of respondents. However, if expectations do have an effect on the way citizens evaluate political actors, it is not obvious that these variations should have much effect. A possible exception is that, as noted earlier, while citizens may form strong expectations about the quality of a particular public service (for instance, local waste collection), their expectations of the way politicians should behave or of what governments should deliver might be less well formed and consequently less deterministic for levels of trust.

A second potential explanation is that citizens’ trust in politicians is less likely to be affected by their expectations of what they think politicians *should* do or *should* deliver than by what they expect politicians *to* do or *to* deliver. That is, drawing on the terminology introduced earlier, trust may be more sensitive to what is anticipated from politicians than from what is desired. This may well be the case, and it would be useful to have data that measured expectations in both anticipated and desired forms to enable this hypothesis to be tested. However, as noted earlier, various studies have measured expectations in desired form and have used the results to suggest that performance perceptions combined with expectations explain trust and satisfaction better than do performance perceptions alone.

A third explanation for the divergent findings lies in the models traditionally used to assess the impact of expectations on citizen evaluations. In particular, it is possible that these models (notably the ‘expectations-disconfirmation’ variant) contain flaws that might limit their ability to identify the impact of expectations over and above perceptions of performance. In particular, models that contain separate items that tap performance perceptions, expectations and disconfirmation assume that the disconfirmation term can be directly compared to the separate terms that measure performance perceptions and expectations. Thus, if the magnitude of the coefficient for the disconfirmation term exceeds that for the stand-alone performance term, then this is taken to show that performance modified by expectations exerts a stronger effect on trust than does performance alone. Yet the comparability of the performance and disconfirmation terms is often assumed rather than being explicitly demonstrated, and this may lead to faulty assumptions and potentially erroneous conclusions.

In some studies, disconfirmation is measured by a survey indicator that directly asks respondents whether they believe the quality of a service has exceeded, matched or fallen below their expectations. For example, in their study of attitudes to state highways in the US, Poister and Thomas (2011) measure disconfirmation through the following survey item: “Would you say that [traffic flow] on the state highways you normally drive on meets, exceeds, or falls short of your expectations for what it should be?” (studies by Roch and Poister (2006) and Morgeson (2013) use similar disconfirmation measures). This formulation clearly invites respondents to assess both their expectations of a service and their perceptions of actual service performance. However, we cannot be sure that the expectations and performance perceptions that respondents take into consideration in answering this survey question are exactly the same as those they employ in answering the separate questions on expectations and performance. Yet if these considerations are not the same, then the impact of the disconfirmation variable may not reflect the fact that it simply combines expectations and performance, but rather that it incorporates in some way – however slight – a qualitatively different judgement to that captured in the individual expectations and performance terms.

A similar problem potentially affects other studies, in which the disconfirmation variable is measured in an indirect, rather than a direct, manner. This indirect measure typically proceeds – as in the analysis presented above – via a computation in which disconfirmation reflects the subtraction of the expectations variable from the variable measuring performance perceptions. Yet a model which includes variables for performance perceptions and expectations cannot also include a disconfirmation term where this measure is computed from the same two variables; to do so would preclude the disconfirmation measure from being separately identified within the model. To address this problem, studies sometimes introduce into the model a separate, discrete term to capture performance perceptions (eg. Van Ryzin, 2004, 2006). While this step allows each of the variables – performance, expectations and disconfirmation – to be separately identified within the same structural model, it confronts a similar problem to that just identified. For it assumes that performance only affects the outcome variable (ie. satisfaction or trust) through one of the ways it is measured. Thus, Van Ryzin claims that the impact of performance on satisfaction with local services in New York only arises through one of its appearances in his model (in the form of a latent variable tapping assessments of various individual services). The other way in which performance is measured in the model – namely a single survey item that asks respondents for their overall assessment of the quality of public services in New York, and which is used to construct the disconfirmation variable – is held not to have an impact on satisfaction independently of the latent measure. If it did, this might suggest that some aspect of performance perceptions that is captured in the disconfirmation variable *and not captured in the separate latent performance measure* is helping to shape levels of satisfaction, and that this effect does not simply reflect performance perceptions adjusted for expectations. In other words, if there are two different measures of performance in a single model – one operating on its own and one operating alongside expectations in the form of a disconfirmation term – how can we discount the possibility that different aspects of performance are being measured, and that both are having an impact on satisfaction? If this possibility is real, it would mean that a positive relationship between disconfirmation and satisfaction might not reflect only the qualifying role of expectations, but also that performance perceptions themselves are at work here, too, albeit in a different form to those captured by the stand-alone performance measure.

In sum, existing models that employ a disconfirmation measure to assess the role of performance perceptions adjusted for expectations implicitly assume that the identification in the models of distinct terms – for performance, expectations and disconfirmation – mean that we can independently estimate the effects of performance and expectations – separately, and in combination in the form of a disconfirmation term – on an outcome variable such as satisfaction or trust. In fact, this implicit assumption is potentially problematic. If, instead of modelling performance, expectations and disconfirmation together, we try to separate out their effects, then we may find, as the present analysis suggests, that the role of expectations in qualifying performance is very much secondary to the direct role of performance alone. This disaggregated approach may be thought to deliver an over-simplified version of the more complete expectations-disconfirmation model; but it does at least allow the individual variables to be tested against one another without relying on potentially troublesome modelling assumptions.

The results presented here do not, by any means, suggest that the conclusions of previous studies are necessarily faulty. But the analysis does highlight a potential shortcoming in the set-up of their models, a shortcoming that may lead to faulty inferences being made about the role of expectations in qualifying performance perceptions. These inferences matter, not just to scholars but to policy makers, in Britain and elsewhere, concerned about low levels of public satisfaction with, and trust in, political institutions and keen to pursue effective remedies. That levels of public trust in politicians in Britain today are low is something that will have escaped few policy makers. In 2012, the proportion of the population saying they trusted British governments was just 18 per cent, less than half the level recorded twenty five years previously (Lee and Young, 2013). These figures present a worry for public officials, who have intrinsic reasons for caring about how much trust they enjoy in citizens’ eyes, and who may also be aware of the wider implications of low levels of trust on, for example, citizens’ propensity to comply with collective obligations and to be receptive to official information (see Dalton, 2004, ch8; Marien and Hooghe, 2010; Tyler, 2001). Policy makers seeking to address these low levels of trust may find succour in many of the previous studies that utilise some form of the expectations-disconfirmation model, since these studies suggest that approval of a public service or institution is highly sensitive to prior expectations. If policy makers can manage these expectations, by dampening down the standards set by citizens (for examples of such strategies, see Lindstadt and Staton, 2011), it may be that levels of public approval or satisfaction will respond positively.

This is an important claim, and a potentially helpful one for policy makers. Politicians are likely to find it easier to shape citizens’ expectations of what they will deliver than they are to influence perceptions of actual performance (particularly if such perceptions relate only loosely to actual levels of performance; see Paldam and Nannestad, 2000; Kelly and Swindell, 2002). Of course, even if expectations about politicians’ behaviour did have such an effect on trust, we might doubt whether it would be proper for policy makers to limit what citizens should (rightly) expect of their elected representatives. Yet more importantly, as this article has suggested, it is by no means clear that reducing public expectations of politicians will have a positive payoff for trust. Instead, the road to higher levels of satisfaction and trust will be a harder one, for these outcomes seem likely to materialise only if politicians and governments can convince the public that they are actually delivering.

**Table 1: Expectations of politicians**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | Importance of attribute (%) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Not veryNot at all\* | Quite | Very | Extremely |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Dedicated to public good |  1 |  5 | 28 | 66 |
| Not use powers for personal gain |  2 |  5 | 20 | 73 |
| Not take bribes |  2 |  3 | 11 | 85 |
| Own up to mistakes |  2 | 10 | 35 | 53 |
| Explain reasons for decisions |  3 | 14 | 36 | 48 |
| Set good example in private life | 10 | 25 | 32 | 33 |
| Tell the truth |  1 |  4 | 19 | 76 |
| Ensure money spent wisely |  1 |  3 | 23 | 74 |
| Be in touch with public |  2 | 10 | 29 | 59 |
| Be competent  |  2 |  6 | 32 | 61 |
|  |  |  |  |  |

Question wording: “How important is it that MPs and government ministers [and devolved representatives and ministers, in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland] do these things?”

\* The responses to these two options are conflated since they each attracted a small number of respondents.

‘Don’t know’ responses amounted to less than 1 per cent for each behaviour.

Weighted N = 2312

**Table 2: Perceived performance of government ministers**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | None(%) | A few(%) | About half(%) | Most(%) | All(%) | Don’t know(%) |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Dedicated to public good |  4 | 24 | 28 | 37 |  5 |  2 |
| Not use powers for personal gain |  8 | 27 | 21 | 36 |  3 |  6 |
| Not take bribes |  2 |  9 | 11 | 50 |  9 | 20 |
| Own up to mistakes | 21 | 50 | 14 |  9 |  1 |  5 |
| Explain reasons for decisions |  8 | 39 | 22 | 22 |  4 |  5 |
| Set good example in private life |  5 | 27 | 25 | 34 |  1 |  8 |
| Tell the truth |  10 | 34 | 28 | 21 |  2 |  5 |
| Ensure money spent wisely | 10 | 31 | 29 | 23 |  3 |  4 |
| Be in touch with public | 12 | 37 | 28 | 19 |  2 |  3 |
| Be competent  |  5 | 22 | 31 | 35 |  3 |  4 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

Question wording: “How many Westminster government ministers [and devolved government ministers, in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland] actually do these things?”

Weighted N = 2312

**Table 3: ‘Disconfirmation’ between perceptions and expectations of ministers**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Perceptions |  | Expectations |  | Perceptions - Expectations |
|  | *Mean* | *Ranka* |  | *Mean* | *Rankb* |  | *Difference* | *Rankb* |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Dedicated to public good | 3.16 | 2 |  | 4.60 | 5 |  | -1.44 | 7 |
| Not use powers for personal gain | 2.98 | 5 |  | 4.62 | 4 |  | -1.64 | 5 |
| Not take bribes | 3.68 | 1 |  | 4.79 | 1 |  | -1.11 | 9 |
| Own up to mistakes | 2.15 | 10 |  | 4.39 | 8 |  | -2.24 | 1 |
| Explain reasons for decisions | 2.73 | 7 |  | 4.30 | 9 |  | -1.56 | 6 |
| Set good example in private life | 3.00 | 4 |  | 3.88 | 10 |  | -0.88 | 10 |
| Tell the truth | 2.68 | 8 |  | 4.71 | 2 |  | -2.03 | 2 |
| Ensure money spent wisely | 2.78 | 6 |  | 4.69 | 3 |  | -1.91 | 3 |
| Be in touch with public | 2.60 | 9 |  | 4.44 | 7 |  | -1.84 | 4 |
| Be competent  | 3.11 | 3 |  | 4.51 | 6 |  | -1.40 | 8 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

a 1=Best, 10=Worst

b 1=Highest, 10=Lowest

**Table 4: The impact on trust of performance and expectations-adjusted performance**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Performance | Performance – Expectations(Disconfirmation) |
|  |  |  |
| Dedicated to public good | .365 | .323 |
| Not use powers for personal gain | .153 | .133 |
| Not take bribes | .274 | .213 |
| Own up to mistakes | .219 | .200 |
| Explain reasons for decisions | .241 | .241 |
| Set good example in private life | .279 | .233 |
| Ensure money spent wisely | .348 | .294 |
| Be in touch with public | .244 | .222 |
| Be competent  | .330 | .293 |
|  |  |  |
| Base range (weighted) | (761 – 919) | (760 – 918) |
|  |  |  |

Spearman’s rank order coefficients. All coefficients are significant at the 0.01 level (one-tailed).

**Table 5: Levels of trust by performance (held constant) and expectations (varied)**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Poor performance |  | Good performance |
|  | High expectations | Modest/low expectations |  | High expectations | Modest/low expectations |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Dedicated to public good | 1.89 (213) | 2.11 (89) |  | 2.66 (283) | 2.75 (163) |
| Not use powers for personal gain | 2.07 (268) | 2.28 (108) |  | 2.44 (312) | 2.59 (95) |
| Not take bribes | 1.88 (88) | 2.26 (42) |  | 2.42 (553) | 2.36 (77) |
| Own up to mistakes | 2.14 (416) | 2.33 (354) |  | 2.93 (48) | 2.60 (58) |
| Explain reasons for decisions | 2.02 (293) | 2.29 (245) |  | 2.54 (102) | 2.74 (144) |
| Set good example in private life | 1.90 (138) | 2.15 (188) |  | 2.47 (109) | 2.63 (266) |
| Ensure money spent wisely | 2.04 (371) | 2.00 (89) |  | 2.83 (178) | 2.65 (93) |
| Be in touch with public | 2.06 (334) | 2.23 (181) |  | 2.73 (108) | 2.62 (118) |
| Be competent  | 1.85 (169) | 2.16 (103) |  | 2.62 (224) | 2.68 (189) |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |

Cell entries are mean levels of trust (where 1=do not trust at all, and 4=trust a lot).

The (weighted) number of respondents in each cell are given in brackets.

 **Appendix 1: Question details and descriptive statistics for variables in structural equation models**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Label | Wording | Min | Max | Mean | SD | Weighted N |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| ***Trust*** |  |  |  |  |  |
| “How much do you generally trust [government ministers] to tell the truth?” |
| 1=Not at all, 2=Not very much, 3=A fair amount, 4=A lot. |  |  |  |  |  |
| *Ministers* | Government ministers | 1 | 4 | 2.33 | .88 | 1065 |
| *MPs* | MPs in general | 1 | 4 | 2.36 | .88 | 1077 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| ***Expectations*** |  |  |  |  |  |
| “How important is it that MPs and government ministers do these things?” |
| 1=Not at all important, 2=Not very important, 3=Quite important, 4=Very important, 5 = Extremely important |
| *Public* | Should be dedicated to doing a good job for the public | 1 | 5 | 4.60 |  .62 | 2304 |
| *Mistakes* | Should own up when they make mistakes | 1 | 5 | 4.39 |  .76 | 2309 |
| *Explain* | Should explain the reasons for their actions and decisions | 1 | 5 | 4.30 |  .80 | 2308 |
| *Private* | Should set a good example for others in their private lives | 1 | 5 | 3.88 | 1.01 | 2306 |
| *Money* | Should make sure that public money is used wisely | 1 | 5 | 4.69 |  .58 | 2310 |
| *In touch* | Should be in touch with what the general public thinks is important | 1 | 5 | 4.44 |  .77 | 2307 |
| *Competent* | Should be competent at their jobs | 1 | 5 | 4.51 | .70 | 2310 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| ***Performance*** |  |  |  |  |  |
| “How many government ministers actually do these things?”1=None, 2=A few, 3=About half, 4=Most, 5=All |  |  |  |  |  |
| *Public* | Are dedicated to doing a good job for the public | 1 | 5 | 3.16 |  .97 | 2265 |
| *Mistakes* | Own up when they make mistakes | 1 | 5 | 2.15 | .91 | 2208 |
| *Explain* | Explain the reasons for their actions and decisions | 1 | 5 | 2.73 | 1.04 | 2204 |
| *Private* | Set a good example for others in their private lives | 1 | 5 | 3.00 |  .97 | 2134 |
| *Money* | Make sure that public money is used wisely | 1 | 5 | 2.78 | 1.03 | 2224 |
| *In touch* | Are in touch with what the general public thinks is important | 1 | 5 | 2.60 | .99 | 2250 |
| *Competent* | Are competent at their jobs | 1 | 5 | 3.11 | .95 | 2216 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| ***Disconfirmation*** |  |  |  |  |  |
| The seven perception measures were each discounted by the seven expectation measures, summed, and recoded into a single seven point scale. |
| 1-6 = Negative disconfirmation, 7 = Neutral/positive disconfirmation | 1 | 7 | 3.78 | 1.59 | 1890 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |

**Appendix 2: Structural equation models showing the effects of performance and disconfirmation on trust**



The manifest variables here measure performance perceptions. Unweighted N=1114



The manifest variables here measure disconfirmation scores. Unweighted N= 1114.

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1. The role of (thwarted) expectations in driving popular discontent found an early treatment in Davies’ (1962) theory of revolutions. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Some empirical studies (Morgeson, 2013; Roch and Poister, 2006; van Ryzin, 2004, 2006) have avoided the distinction between anticipatory and desirability forms of expectation by asking survey respondents directly for their “expectations” of a service, without clarifying whether this refers to anticipated or desired outcomes. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. So trust in object O = $Σ(AiVi)$ where *A*=attribute and *V*=value for the *i*th attribute. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Trust in O = $Σ\frac{Pi}{Ei}$ where *P*=performance and *E*=expectation for the *i*th attribute. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Trust in O = $Σ(Pi-Ei)$. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. In the absence of longitudinal or experimental data, it is difficult to establish precisely the nature of the causal relations between the core attitudinal variables (Van Ryzin, 2006, p.7). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Since different split halves of the sample were asked the trust question in binary and in ordinal forms, the number of respondents for each trust measure comprises only roughly half the total sample. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. It would, of course, be desirable to test the results generated here using measures that tap other domains of trust. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Among the samples in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the representatives and ministers asked about were those within the devolved legislatures and executives. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. There is some suggestion in the literature (Oliver, 1980, p.463; 1997, pp.103-9; Spreng and Page, 2003, p.33; van Ryzin, 2006; Poister and Thomas, 2011) that explicit measures of disconfirmation (survey questions that ask respondents whether a set of outcomes was better or worse than expected) perform better than implicit measures (where disconfirmation is computed from measures of perceptions and expectations, as here). No such explicit disconfirmation measure was carried on the CSPL survey, so only an implicit measure of disconfirmation can be used. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. The data reported here are weighted to take account of unequal probabilities of selection, variations in response rates and any biases in the representation of different country populations within the sample. The data used in the structural equation modelling reported later on are unweighted, since the software employed (Amos) does not easily accommodate such sample weights. Pairwise deletion of missing data is used in the correlation and regression analyses and in the structural equation models. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. The relatively lowly priority attached to political actors setting an example in their private life might explain why politicians are not always penalised by voters following cases of personal transgression, as they often are following other forms of misconduct. For an example of this, based on the case of US President Bill Clinton’s affair with Monika Lewinsky, see Waterman et al, 1999: 946. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. If we replicate this analysis using data from another year (the 2006 CSPL survey) a similar effect – namely a stronger effect on trust of performance perceptions than of disconfirmation – is found. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. An exploratory factor analysis of the nine forms of conduct showed two dimensions to people’s performance perceptions and expectations: the first dimension included all the behavioural standards except for those involving ‘using power for personal gain’ and ‘taking bribes’, which loaded more strongly onto a second dimension. Confirmatory factor analysis underscores this finding. A nine indicator model of performance perceptions and trust delivers a poorer fit to the data than a model employing a reduced set of seven indicators, excluding those relating to making personal gain and taking bribes. Details of this analysis are available online [link to author’s website]. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Indicators suggest that the models provide an adequate fit to the data. The ‘performance’ model has a χ2 of 82.25(on 20df), p<0.001. Although a model that fits the covariance matrix should show an insignificant χ2 value, this can be misleading if a large sample size is used. A better gauge is provided by various fit indices (CFI = 0.988, RMSEA = 0.037), which suggest the model fits the data quite well (Byrne, 2010, pp.78-81). The ‘disconfirmation’ model had a slightly weaker, although still acceptable, fit to the data, with a χ2 of 117.24(on 20df), p<0.001 (CFI = 0.982, RMSEA = 0.046). Maximum likelihood estimation assumes interval level data with a multivariate normal distribution, while the data used here are ordinal in form. I therefore re-ran the models using a Bayesian estimation function, which does not assume normality among model parameters. Although the factor loadings obtained from the Bayesian estimation differ somewhat from those obtained from the maximum likelihood estimation, the essential result – that trust is more strongly affected by performance perceptions than by performance adjusted for expectations – remains consistent across both forms of estimation (details available online; see endnote 14). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Partisanship – in particular whether a citizen’s preferred party is in or out of government – is usually found to exert a moderately strong effect on trust (Anderson et al, 2005). The partisanship measure I use contrasts respondents indicating that they would be most inclined to vote for Labour (the incumbent administration in 2008) with those indicating support for one of the other parties. While levels of trust turn out to be somewhat lower among the latter group than among the former, the inclusion of this partisanship term has no effect on the other relations within the models. I should also note the effects of measuring trust in a different form. As noted above, the 2008 CSPL survey measured trust both in ordinal form and in binary form. The results already shown for trust measured in ordinal form are broadly replicated if we measure trust in binary form. Thus, performance perceptions alone are found to have a stronger effect on trust than are performance perceptions adjusted for expectations. The only difference in the model is the rather lower magnitude of the coefficients and the resulting degree of variance explained in the dependent variable, reinforcing the point made earlier that we obtain more discriminatory power when we measure trust as a graded (ordinal) judgement than as an either/or (binary) one. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. In an identical model, but where the dependent variable is trust in MPs, we find a standardised correlation between performance and trust of 0.44 (p<0.001), while the equivalent correlation with the disconfirmation measure is somewhat weaker, at 0.36 (p<0.001). (The sample for this analysis is of people in England only, since assessments of MPs were not gathered in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.) [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. A two-way analysis of variance shows that, while differing levels of performance perceptions are associated with statistically significant variations in levels of trust for all the standards of conduct, differing levels of expectations are so associated for only two of the nine standards of conduct. Moreover, across all the standards of conduct, the impact of performance perceptions alone on trust (measured by the partial Eta squared figure) is far greater than the impact of expectations when included in an interaction term. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)