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Trust as foundation and endangerment of democracy

Simone Dietz

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Abstract What are the consequences of lies for democracy? Contrary to a widespread assumption, they often do not lead to a loss of trust in politicians and a crisis of politics, because trust in politics is not primarily directed toward truthfulness. Systematic lying in politics does not necessarily threaten democracy as such, but it threatens specifically deliberative democracy and its procedures of rational opinion- and will-forming. The article starts from the thesis that it is not a general loss of trust but the one-sided concentration of political trust solely in the abilities of individual politicians or in scientific or technical expertise that endangers deliberative democracy. In answer to the question “Who owes whom trust in what in a democracy?” a distinction is made between moral trust and functional reliance, the significance of moral trust for collective action in democracy is explained, and three variants of trust that endanger deliberative democracy are outlined: autocratic, scientific, and technocratic variants.

Keywords Emotional trust · Deliberative democracy · Lying · Truthfulness · Reliance

Vertrauen als Grundlage und Gefährdung von Demokratie

Zusammenfassung Welche Folgen haben Lügen für die Demokratie? Entgegen einer verbreiteten Annahme führen sie oft nicht zu einem Vertrauensverlust gegenüber Politikern und einer Krise der Politik, denn Vertrauen in der Politik richtet sich nicht vorrangig auf Wahrhaftigkeit. Systematisches Lügen in der Politik bedroht nicht notwendig die Demokratie, sondern speziell die deliberative Demokratie und ihre

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Verfahren einer rationalen Meinungs- und Willensbildung. Der Beitrag geht von der These aus, dass nicht ein genereller Vertrauensverlust, sondern die einseitige Konzentration des politischen Vertrauens allein auf die Fähigkeiten einzelner Personen, oder auf wissenschaftlichen oder technischen Sachverstand die deliberative Demokratie gefährdet. In Beantwortung der Frage „Wer schuldet in einer Demokratie wem Vertrauen in was?“ wird zwischen moralischem Vertrauen und funktionalem Sich-Verlassen-auf unterschieden, die Bedeutung moralischen Vertrauens für kollektives Handeln in der Demokratie erläutert und drei Varianten demokratie-gefährdenden Vertrauens skizziert: eine autokratische, szientistische und technokratische Variante.

Schlüsselwörter Emotionales Vertrauen · Deliberative Demokratie · Lügen · Wahrhaftigkeit · Sich-Verlassen-auf

If one deals with the topic of ‘lies in politics’ over many years, one finds that there is almost always a reason for claiming that this topic is particularly relevant at the moment. Actually, there is always a current occasion that revolves around lies in politics. In the late 1990s, it was about Bill Clinton’s lies regarding his relationship with an intern in the USA; in Germany, it was about the ruling party’s lies regarding the true origin of party donations. In 2003, it was the lie about weapons of mass destruction that was supposed to justify the war against Iraq. In 2008, during the financial crisis, chancellor Merkel’s lie “your savings deposits are safe” was supposed to calm the minds of savers. In 2013, the National Security Agency scandal revealed a previously denied systematic cooperation between private and government data collection. In 2014, Putin insulted the public by claiming that there were no Russian soldiers in Crimea—and if there were, they were just lost or on vacation there. That same year, Russia presented false evidence to blame Ukraine for shooting down passenger plane MH-17. In 2016, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov used the hoax of the kidnapping and rape of a Russian-German girl to stir up anti-migrant sentiment and protest against the German government. Donald Trump ran his presidential campaign with false accusations against his competitor and numerous other lies, e.g., lies about verified facts such as the unemployment rate or the crime rate. In defense of the obviously false claim that the audience at his inauguration was larger than that of his predecessors, Trump’s press secretary used the term “alternative facts” in 2017, which has since become the key term for a new quality of lies in politics.

One could take this list as evidence that lies are usually part of politics and not worth getting worked up about. The main objection to such an acceptance of lies in politics claims that political power depends on the recognition and trust of citizens. If citizens constantly expected to be lied to, trust in political officeholders and thus in the political system as a whole would be impossible.

The lies of Trump and Putin, however, seem to prove the opposite. Both can still rely on a considerable number of political supporters whose trust does not seem to have been damaged by the obvious and proven lies. On the contrary, the lies of these politicians even seem to have strengthened the trust of their supporters. In view of the actual situation, the expectation that such trust will not prove lasting

seems like a pious wish that good will prevail over evil in the end. In contrast, it seems more appropriate to me to note that trust in politics is apparently not primarily oriented toward truthfulness, but toward other qualities. The crisis of democracy is not a general crisis of trust; there is not a lack of trust per se, but of trust in the procedures of deliberative democracy, in which “decisions are publicly discussed and justified by arguments” (Schäfer and Zürn 2021, p. 27).

In order to better understand the relationship between trust and politics, I will explore the question what kind of trust is fundamental to democracy? Who owes trust to whom in a democracy? What exactly is this trust directed at, and of what kind is it? I think that both too much trust (of the wrong kind) and too little trust (of the right kind) can endanger a democracy. Deliberative democracy, in particular, requires not merely trust but reasonable trust. And trust is required not only in persons holding political office, but also in the argumentative processes of opinion and will formation, in procedures by which officeholders are selected and decisions are made. In addition to citizens and politicians, mass media and scientific experts are also important, especially for the procedures of deliberative democracy. Trust in democracy requires cooperation between these four groups. In the current situation, lies are, in my opinion, a symptom rather than the cause of the crisis of democracy.

In the following I discuss the significance of trust in democracy in three steps. The first section explains the concept of trust as an emotional and rational attitude, and as a moral or functional relationship. I distinguish between moral trust and functional reliance, and give four criteria of trust. In the second section, the focus shifts from trust as an individual relationship to trust in functional groups, institutions, and procedures. The question is: what is the functional equivalent of individual virtues that can ground trust in democratic institutions? Finally, in the third section, the focus is on the good or value toward which trust is directed. I will distinguish between three variants of trust that endanger deliberative democracy: the autocratic, scientific, and technocratic variants.

1 Trust as a subjective attitude and social relationship

Trust is an attitude that enables us to cooperate with other people even though we cannot know with certainty what their actual motives are and how they will behave in the future. There are two different elements to this attitude, a normative one and a rational-calculative one, which have to be reconciled.

Annette Baier (1986, p. 235) defines the attitude of trust as “accepted vulnerability” and focuses primarily on the normative, moral dimension of trust relationships. When we trust a person, we assume that their actions are characterized by a fundamental benevolence toward vulnerable beings. We trust them as a moral person who respects the rights of others, who takes into account their vulnerability, and who does not abuse them for their own benefit. When we trust a person, there is more at stake than just success or failure: what is at stake is our capacity for peaceful cooperation as social beings. Moreover, Baier emphasizes that trust is a “three-place predicate”: “A trusts B with valued thing C,” which is entrusted (Baier 1986, p. 236).

Niklas Luhmann (1968), in contrast to Baier, adopts a functional perspective with his definition of trust as a “mechanism for reducing complexity.” By narrowing down the topic to the “problem of risky advance performance” in social action, he emphasizes the strategic-calculative dimension under conditions of uncertainty (1968, p. 21). Here, too, risk is an essential element: “Trust is ultimately always unfounded; it comes about by exaggerating the available information” (1968, p. 23). Personal trustworthiness, according to Luhmann, does not depend on the moral attitude of benevolence or respect toward others, but solely on the foreseeability of behavior: “Trustworthy is he who sticks to what he has consciously or unconsciously communicated about himself.” (1968, p. 37).

It would be wrong to conflate the different definitions of Baier and Luhmann as an opposition between an affective and a rational understanding of trust. Affectivity and rationality interact in trust as a complex attitude. Feelings of fear or aversion are relevant indicators of distrust, just as sympathy is often the basis for trust. Uncertainty can initially be just a diffuse feeling, but it can also become the justified result of a situation analysis that we have conducted based on our feeling. Feelings cause us to seek reasons for or against cooperating with others, they may change in this process of reasoning, and they play an important role in forming judgments. Trust as an emotion can replace the feeling of uncertainty, but not our understanding that it is entirely possible that our cooperation partners have ulterior motives, and that we can never be completely sure whether the cooperation with the other will turn out well. In my opinion, this is exactly what is meant when Annette Baier refers to trust as “accepted vulnerability.”

The relationship between the emotional and rational components of trust becomes particularly relevant when it is questioned whether trust can be *demand*ed. For this seems to presuppose the question “Who owes whom what trust in a democracy?” Can one actually owe someone trust or demand trust from someone? Doesn’t the demand “Trust me!” rather suggest that there is reason for mistrust? Those who think that trust cannot be demanded emphasize above all the disposition of an emotion: emotions cannot be commanded. Trust as a complex attitude toward others presupposes voluntariness. “Trust me!” is therefore not to be understood as a demand, but rather a wish or request that the other person may give me a chance. This can be supported by providing reasons: “Have I ever given you a reason not to trust me?” can reject unjustified mistrust and lay claim to trust. To be sure, the trust being solicited here is ultimately an attitude that cannot be established ad hoc. However, the advertisement for trust is also directed at the concrete decision to get involved with the other person, in sociological terms: to cooperate. This decision requires unambiguity, even if there are conflicting feelings. “Trust me!” advertises above all the decision to act cooperatively, from which, in the best case, a lasting relationship of trust can grow.

The personal-private granting or denial of trust usually concerns the direct relationship between two or a few individuals. In the political sphere, it is about collective processes that affect the political community as a whole. The decision not to trust can have much more dramatic consequences here than in the personal-private sphere. This is because a definitive abandoning of relations is not possible in the political sphere: The world is no longer large enough for political collectives,

interest groups, parties, or nations to completely avoid each other for all time and rule out any cooperation in the future. Therefore, the rational dimension of trust is of central importance here, and the focus only on affections or emotions is a regressive attitude that makes negotiation about reasons impossible.

The essential contrast between Baier's and Luhmann's definitions of trust does not lie in the opposition between emotion and rationality, but in the role of morality. For Baier, the moral standpoint, the benevolence or respect for others, is the starting point of a trust relationship. Those who trust decide not only to normatively claim the morality of their cooperation partners, but also to orient their actions to it—and to accept their own vulnerability associated with the risk of this decision. Trust implies that the trustee (the one trusted) takes into account the vulnerability of the trustor (the one trusting), and the fact that the latter trusts the former: trust is a reflexive relationship.

The morally neutral approach to uncertainty, which Luhmann defines as trust, Baier refers to as an attitude of "relying on" (Baier 1986, p. 234). To rely on something means to act in expectation of a certain desired behavior of the other person without associating a moral claim. For example, one may rely on the rule that persons will not harm themselves unnecessarily. Or that very violent emotions will weaken over time. Or that a hostage-taker who tries to enforce their demand by threatening others will sooner or later get tired and fall asleep. The properties of objects are also something we rely on: for example, that the chair I am sitting on will support my weight without collapsing. Disappointments can upset us, but they provide no reason for reproach or indignation.

Trust is always based on common norms, on mutual respect, consideration, or fairness. Relying on something or someone does not require this common ground, it is based solely on the descriptive and evaluative judgments of individual actors. If we consider politics not only as a functional system of cooperation, but as a democratic institution that has to comply with the normative claims of equal freedom, rational public will formation, and common good orientation, Luhmann's morally neutral concept is not sufficient to capture the importance of reliance for and in democratic politics. In the following, therefore, I endorse Baier's moral concept of trust.

In summary, a relationship of trust is characterized by at least four features, of which the fourth marks the distinction from the attitude of reliance:

1. Trust and reliance are directed toward the desired behavior of others, that is significant to the realization of a particular good or value.
2. Trust serves to deal with uncertainty, which cannot be completely eliminated, but can only be bridged emotionally and by the decision to act. Reasons for the assumption of the future behavior of others can never provide absolute certainty. To trust or rely on something is always a risky advance.
3. Trust is a complex, emotional and rational attitude, which, in addition to the cognitive assessment of facts and abilities, is also based on more or less reflected affects and evaluations.

4. In contrast to reliance trust is based on the assumption and moral claim of a fundamental moral attitude of benevolence and mutual respect from both cooperation partners, and thus creates an emotional bond between them in the long term.

As an intersubjective and practical relationship, trust and reliance differ from general subjected attitudes such as hope or confidence. As a social relationship, trust also differs from outcome-oriented attitudes such as agreement or satisfaction. This is often overlooked by empirical studies about trust in politics. Trust cannot depend solely on the outcome of politics, such as better public service, lower taxes, higher prosperity. Rather, trust depends on the behavior of individuals or groups. It means no more and no less than being convinced that someone is committed to the desired goals for the right reasons and in the appropriate way. But this cannot guarantee the achievement of the desired goals.

2 Trust in democratic procedures

In order to answer the question, “Who owes whom trust in what in a democracy?”, on the one hand we have to consider the actors involved. On the other hand, we have to delimit which good or which value it is that is entrusted in the democratic process. Can trust in a comprehensive moral sense refer solely to individual attitudes and characteristics, and thus only to individual actors, whereas in the case of functionally defined groups and institutional procedures one can speak only of a morally neutral reliance? Or can a morally substantial attitude of trust be meaningfully adopted or even demanded toward functional groups and institutional procedures as well? Trust in persons refers not only to general moral attitudes but also to personal abilities or virtues. In a generalized form, the willingness to cooperate based on trust is also relevant with respect to persons as a part of a functional group. For ultimately, the common ground of democracy is based on the willingness to cooperate, not only in personal relationships but also in more anonymous contexts of role-oriented actions. In this context, too, assessments and rules based on experience and affective or emotional attitudes provide the grounds for decisions to act. Also, emotional bonds play an important role for collective action in a society.

At least the four groups of citizens, political representatives, mass media, and experts are important for the functioning of the procedures of a deliberative democracy. They fulfill different functional roles for the political community and must each have certain abilities or virtues to do so. In the case of the group of citizens and politicians, it is primarily a matter of common good orientation and fairness with regard to the agreed procedures. Trust in a democracy does not work like a one-way street. Expectations are directed at politicians *and* citizens. Democratic policies become impossible if citizens are not trusted to consider the welfare of others beyond their individual interests, or to accept majority decisions even if they themselves belong to the losing side. Conversely, democratic debate about appropriate measures also becomes impossible if politicians are not trusted to seriously seek solutions that take into account all stakeholders. Mutual respect is not just an individual moral demand, it is a fundamental requirement of democracy. Moreover, political representatives

and the administrations assigned to them must have expertise regarding the implementation of political decisions. If citizens do not have confidence in the problem orientation and expertise of politicians, every delay and every compromise gives rise to bitterness and in turn hinders the successful implementation of policy measures.

What is the specific significance of truthfulness in this context? It can initially be understood in two different ways: as trust in the sincere character of a person, the congruence of their self-presentation with their behavior, or as trust in the truthfulness of the statements of a person. Although sincerity as an individual virtue is a personal quality that has no equivalent at the anonymous level of group action, the truthfulness of statements at a collective level can be supported and controlled by moral institutions such as professional codes of conduct or functional mechanisms such as pluralism and separation of powers. However, to assume the effectiveness of such mechanisms and to assume that statements in the political sphere are more likely to be truthful than untruthful corresponds to the attitude of reliance rather than trust.

In the representative relationship between citizens and elected officials, the truthfulness of statements is important above all as part of the required fairness. Whoever acts in trust on behalf of the people must provide the people with truthful information about what they are doing. In special cases, however, orientation to the common good and fidelity to the contract may well be compatible with lying: if they do not serve one's own advantage or preservation of power, but are intended to avert harm to the community that could arise in the specific situation through public communication, and if they are temporary lies, for which the person who used them will take responsibility later on. An example of this are lies that are intended to prevent destructive dynamics in financial markets in the short term. In this respect, truthfulness in democracy is not an absolute duty, but a relative one, which remains subordinate to the requirements of respect for equal freedom and the common good. In the public discourse, however, respect for equal freedom will hardly get along without truthfulness in argumentation. The offensive lies of autocratic politicians, which are not justified by concrete emergencies but are used as a political strategy and demonstration of power, are therefore to be understood above all as a struggle against deliberative democracy. Instead of convincing the public with rational arguments the aim is to discredit the opponent. For those who see democracy only as a power struggle between competing groups, and who consider common good orientation and the search for consent to be irrelevant or impossible, truthfulness is not of great importance. In this context, a politician's lies can be interpreted by his supporters as a sign of strength against his opponent and promote their trust in him rather than undermine it.

In contrast to the profession of politicians, professional mass media and scientific experts depend on a professional ethic that is directed toward truthfulness and is indispensable for the trust that is placed in these groups. Both the journalistic handling of information and the methods of empirical sciences are oriented toward truth and require accuracy and diligence—in addition to the necessary expertise in each case. False reports or manipulated research results damage trust in the professional groups of journalists and experts just as much as sloppy research or methodological negligence. Especially when there is the impression that these are not just isolated

cases. The fundamental credibility of information is a condition for the seriousness of public debates. However, it is not only secured by moral demands of truthfulness, but also by functional mechanisms of democratic control. In this sense, we rely on appropriate procedures and rule out, under normal conditions, for example, that public events with hundreds or thousands of actors involved could follow a large-scale secret plan. It simply contradicts reasonable expectation, derived from experience, that such extensive conspiracies could remain secret in a democracy. Here, 'under normal conditions' means: as long as there is no robust evidence that these functional mechanisms are overridden.

How do we know that the moon landing and the attack on the World Trade Center actually took place, how do we know that Alexander van der Bellen was actually elected Federal President of Austria and that Ukraine was attacked by Russia? The answer is not 'because we trust in the truthfulness of all journalists and experts' but because, in addition to the fundamental trust in the professional ethics of these groups, we also rely on the fact that in democracies with freedom of speech, with independent mass media and scientific institutions, and with the practice of a pluralistic public sphere reports about such significant events, in which a great many people and entities are involved, these events cannot be faked. This is, above all, an estimation of probability, a reliance on the usual behavior of people whom we do not know in detail. If relevant parts of the population become followers of crude conspiracy narratives, the diagnosis of a loss of confidence falls short. Rather, it is a refusal of rational methods of forming judgments, and a refusal to recognize freedom of opinion and pluralism as mechanisms of democratic control, although the possibility of publicly propagating one's own point of view is also based precisely on this.

We rely on compliance with given norms because we know that sanctions influence the calculated self-interest of those involved, not because we trust in their morality at all times. Systems of control and sanctioning, however, never work seamlessly. They cannot completely replace the necessary trust in morality. Conversely, they are rather something like default guarantees for the gaps in moral practice. Control systems, too, always rely on the fundamental willingness of those involved to cooperate.

3 Trust endangering democracy

Democracy cannot exist without the fundamental willingness of all those involved to cooperate, to act cooperatively and fairly despite uncertainty, and to support decisions even if one has not voted for them oneself. This trust must be constantly reexamined and justified in public debate. Searching for solutions to common problems, it is not enough to rely on the functioning of control mechanisms. Nor is it enough to trust in the special abilities of single individuals to find the solutions for us. The willingness and self-confidence of citizens to understand problems and assess solutions are indispensable for democracy. Without this willingness and self-trust, the credibility of journalists and experts, or the trustworthiness of politicians,

cannot be seriously assessed.¹ That is why it is an alarm signal when public political debate increasingly focuses on individuals and their self-promotion, as if democratic participation could be reduced to personal trust, or when individual groups of actors are played off against each other, as if the pluralism of public authorities were the problem rather than an essential mechanism for finding the truth. The flip side of the lack of civic self-confidence lies in the regression to a merely affective or egocentric relationship of trust that closes itself off to rational reason. In a negative form, this regression manifests as resentment and partial refusal to cooperate with political representatives.² Here, trust is understood to be like a potential for blackmail, which can be exchanged for desired benefits or the promise of such benefits, without concern for the conditions under which and the price at which the demanded results are possible. The so-called protest vote, which does not really advocate a party or political position but is primarily defiantly directed against established political candidates and parties, is an expression of an interest-driven and irresponsible denial of trust.

Public political discourse requires a serious and truthful exchange of arguments for cooperative problem solving. Political business in the narrower sense requires the negotiation of compromises with regard to different interests. Neither can work without common ground. Trust cannot be demanded in any single case—it must be left to the individual to decide whether the reasons for or against trust prevail. What is required, however, is a willingness to trust, and that means: mistrust and the refusal to cooperate require reasons, and these reasons must remain negotiable in principle.

Deliberative democracies are based on serious public discourse, which depends on trust in mutual fairness, problem orientation, and rational argumentation, in the truth and veracity of information and expertise, and in the common good orientation of the participants. A systematic devaluation of such discourses attacks the foundation of deliberative democracy. The endangerment does not lie in the loss of trust in politics in general. Rather, the problem lies in the fact that a different kind of trust increasingly determines political events, one that is regressively immunized against rational arguments, which also anti-pluralistically wants to trade off the interaction of the various groups of players in favor of a central authority.

In the autocratic variant, trust is focused on a single charismatic person who is supposed to clean up the main problems through their character and strategic abilities. This model usually cannot do without a confrontational demarcation between one's own group and the others. It is not about trust in the common good, in the universal morality of equal freedom but about the particular morality of one's own group in the rough world of interest struggles between 'us' and 'them'—partiality becomes the basis. In this view, problems result primarily from a lack of enforcement and must be decided by way of a power struggle. Cooperation with the 'others' is initiated for strategic reasons, with mental reservations and without serious acceptance of a common norm such as fairness. The community of the 'we' is formed

¹ How conspiracy narratives, lies, and the denial of plain facts can undermine self-trust is examined by Rietdijk (2021).

² How resentment can undermine democracy is examined by Illouz (2023) and Fleury (2023).

affectively via demarcation from the others and the common bond with the leader.³ Public debate only functions as self-assurance and denunciation. Therefore, truth or truthfulness is no longer of great importance here. The leader is trusted because of his or her appearance of strength toward others and partiality toward ‘us.’ Lies are either not recognized as such or welcomed as proof of strength and assertiveness. The rule here is: true is what prevails in the power struggle, and trust is earned by whoever belongs to us.

In the scientific variant the focus is on the truth-oriented group of experts. From this perspective, all political questions are framed to be questions of truth that must be answered scientifically. With their results, scientific experts prescribe what politics must implement. To put it bluntly, problems result only from the fact that scientists are not listened to. Whether it is a pandemic, climate change, or war, the solution lies in scientific expertise. However, how it is decided in the event of conflict which scientists are the true experts remains an open question. The political challenge of global cooperation across national borders, cultures, and systems, without a global system of sanctions or monopoly on the use of force, is downplayed as a mere implementation problem. The flip side of the exaggerated trust in science is a disproportionate disregard for what politics must achieve—and for the importance of citizen participation in democracy. Public deliberation is exhausted in appeals to consider scientific results and indignation that politicians appear unwilling.

Finally, the technocratic variant places too much trust in technical and administrative expertise and misunderstands politics as purely instrumental problem solving to be measured solely by its output. Because normative questions are hardly considered as political issues, the interpretive framework remains conservatively oriented toward existing social forms of life, and disputes focus on questions of distribution. If politics do not produce the desired results, this is interpreted as a lack of interest that must be corrected by shifting the balance of power. But there will be no technical answer to the question, for example, if we prefer risking the lives of people with poor health or risking economic stability—reminiscent of the problems we had to face during the pandemic. Or if we prefer to wait for a more guaranteed global compliance with CO₂ emission reduction and change our own energy sector slowly, or, conversely, if we stop the use of fossil energy in our country as soon as possible because this is our own responsibility. Or if we will support the Ukrainian defense against Russia with weapons and financial means, even if this leads to higher energy costs domestically.

All three variants devalue the democratic discourse of a cooperative search for solutions to problems and the pluralism of instances and arguments that are fundamental to deliberative democracy. The threat to deliberative democracy is not a crisis of trust caused by the lies of individual politicians. Rather, deliberative democracy is endangered by a weakening of the discursive public sphere, which comes from many different directions. Irrational tendencies that declare truth to be a question of power combine with scientific movements that pit scientific truth against political debate. Technocratic expectations of feasibility vis-à-vis professional politics feed

³ For the phenomenon of charismatic political leadership illuminated from the perspective of political psychology see Willner (1984).

a denialist attitude of bitterness and resentment. The lack of trust in democracy is above all a lack of civic self-trust that participation in rational procedures of public decision-making could actually be powerful and effective, and that a common good orientation and a willingness to cooperate are not naïve fictions but a basic requirement of democracy.⁴

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