


RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Political Trust and Aspirations to Influence Social Media During a Crisis: A Longitudinal Study

Aki Koivula¹  | Sanna Malinen²  | Ilkka Koiranen¹ 

¹University of Turku, Turku, Finland | ²Tampere University, Tampere, Finland

Correspondence: Aki Koivula (akjeko@utu.fi)

Received: 11 June 2025 | **Revised:** 22 December 2025 | **Accepted:** 21 January 2026

Funding: Helsingin Sanomat Foundation, Grant/Award Number: 9/2021; Research Council of Finland, Grant/Award Numbers: 320162, 334157; Kone Foundation, Grant/Award Number: 12/2024

Keywords: COVID-19, Finland | crisis communication | longitudinal survey | political trust | social media

ABSTRACT

This study investigated how political trust shaped citizens' aspirations to influence others on social media during a COVID-19 pandemic. Using four-wave longitudinal survey data (2017–2021; $N = 2172$) collected from 543 citizens in Finland, we first analysed how political trust moderated the temporal development of individuals' aspirations to influence others online. We then examined how trust and influence aspirations jointly contributed to citizens' social media behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings showed that aspirations to influence declined during the crisis, particularly among those with high political trust. In contrast, individuals with low trust typically maintained their influence aspirations and were more likely to engage on social media and to criticise public authorities. High political trust, on the other hand, did not promote criticism but was instead positively associated with support. Overall, these findings clarify social media engagement dynamics in times of crisis and the tendency of online discussions to amplify the voices of those who are politically frustrated or sceptical. From a policy perspective, the results highlight how trust asymmetries shape visible participation in digital spaces, offering evidence relevant to the design of crisis communication, platform governance, and strategies for engaging both vocal critics and less visible, high-trust citizens.

1 | Introduction

Social media has become a powerful platform for persuasion, shaping public opinion and influencing political behaviour (Zhuravskaya et al. 2020). Prior research has shown that exposure to social media content can predict changes in individuals' political attitudes (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2025). This influence is particularly salient during crises, when social media often serves as the first source of information. In such moments, informal mediators, such as influencers, play a decisive role in framing narratives and shaping people's opinions, attitudes, and behaviours (Malinen and Koivula 2024). As social media content is largely user-generated, it is essential to understand the motivations behind its creation, as well as the factors that discourage participation, to grasp both what is expressed and what remains unheard.

While previous research has examined why individuals try to persuade others online, less is known about the political incentives behind such aspirations (Druckman 2022). The role of political trust is particularly unclear. Given its well-established link to political participation (Citrin and Stoker 2018), trust may also shape individuals' willingness to influence others on social media, but this dimension has been largely overlooked in current scholarship. This gap matters: If trust affects not only whether people engage but also how they seek to persuade others, it becomes a key variable for understanding digital political discourse. Integrating political trust into analyses of online influence thus provides new insights into why social media has become a contested arena, especially during crises when trust is volatile and the stakes of persuasion are highest.

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2026 The Author(s). *Policy & Internet* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of Policy Studies Organization.

In this study, we analyse four-wave longitudinal survey data collected between 2017 and 2021 ($N = 2172$) from 543 Finnish citizens to investigate the ambivalent consequences of political trust on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic offers a unique context for examining the impact of political trust on political influence within hybrid media systems where political actors, experts, journalists, and citizens converge (Chadwick 2017). During this crisis, social media became central to communication and persuasion, enabling citizens to both support and criticise government decisions and propose alternative responses (Chen et al. 2020). However, important questions remain: Why did some individuals actively participate in social media campaigns while others remained passive observers?

To address this gap, this article asks: *How does political trust influence individuals' motivations to persuade others on social media during times of crisis, and what mechanisms account for both active engagement and silence in digital political discourse?*

The implications of trust can be viewed from three perspectives. First, the pandemic may have fostered discontent and eroded trust. When trust is low, political and opinion leaders struggle to mobilise support, while scepticism and misinformation thrive. Such low trust can fuel political influencing and activism in public arenas, especially on social media (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013). Second, the epistemic uncertainty of the COVID-19 era may have increased reliance on national leaders. Greater trust could encourage compliance with government guidelines, leading citizens to delegate opinion leadership to institutional figures and dampen their own motivation for active advocacy (Baker and Oneal 2001). Third, from a governance perspective, political trust is not only a determinant of political behaviour but also one of diagnostic indicators of how citizens perceive institutional transparency, credibility, and responsiveness in crisis communication (Bouckaert and Van de Walle 2003; Christensen and Lægread 2020).

This study makes four contributions to research on political trust and influence on social media. First, in digital participation research, it shifts attention from the production of political content to the motivation to influence. Second, it extends the literature on political trust by showing how trust shapes not only whether individuals participate but also why they engage in or refrain from persuasive action, especially during crises. Third, by drawing on unique four-wave panel data collected before and after the pandemic, it captures both between-person differences and within-person changes, offering a dynamic view of online political behaviour. Finally, tracking trust alongside patterns of online participation allows insight into how institutional communication coincides with public confidence and engagement under conditions of heightened uncertainty. Together, these contributions provide new insights into the role of trust in hybrid media systems, highlighting how social media functions as a platform for political expression, as well as a site where institutional legitimacy and public authority are negotiated in times of uncertainty. As public authorities increasingly rely on social media platforms to disseminate information and solicit feedback, understanding how trust conditions participation becomes central to evidence-based governance, misinformation management, and democratic resilience.

2 | Theoretical Background

2.1 | Opinion Leadership in the Context of Crisis

Previous research has examined individual differences in both the ability to influence others and susceptibility to influence, as well as the conditions that facilitate influence on social media (Huffaker 2010; Weeks et al. 2017; Diehl et al. 2016). A classical definition of roles in opinion influencing is offered by Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) two-step flow of communication model, in which mass media audiences are roughly divided into opinion leaders and opinion followers. Opinion leaders absorb information from the media and transmit it to others, thereby shaping public opinion and influencing behaviour through interpersonal communication. While this model assumes a relatively stable media environment and confidence in those who lead opinions, more recent contexts, such as social media, especially in times of crisis, may alter individuals' willingness and ability to take on this role.

Compared to traditional mass media, the current social media landscape is characterised by multidirectional information flows and hybrid networks (e.g., Chadwick 2017). Despite these differences, the general attributes of opinion leadership remain applicable in understanding the flow of information among social media users. In traditional media settings, opinion leaders are usually recognised as experts who confidently convey expertise and cultivate networks for information dissemination (Rogers and Cartano 1962; Burt 1999). Social media use has amplified this dynamic by allowing well-connected, active content producers to transmit information more effectively to influence their followers' political attitudes (Huffaker 2010; Weeks et al. 2017; Yoon et al. 2022). As social media has diversified the ways in which influence can be exerted, the classical concept of opinion leadership has broadened, encouraging a wider range of actors to aspire to influence despite its uneven distribution (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2018; Yoon et al. 2022; Weeks et al. 2017).

During times of crisis, the established information landscape and conventional notions of opinion leadership are challenged. This was seen in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, when traditional experts and authorities were unable to provide sufficient information to be passed on, leading to an information context characterised by epistemic uncertainty. The sudden outbreak of the crisis disrupted people's existing cognitive structures (e.g., Dow et al. 2021), complicating the formation of informed opinions. Furthermore, the fragmented nature of COVID-19 information undermined the development of expertise and self-confidence, two key attributes of opinion leadership (Bandura 1977; Keller and Berry 2003). This fragmentation made it especially difficult for ordinary citizens to take the role of opinion leaders in the midst of a crisis. Finally, the widespread consensus on the severity of the crisis and the acceptance of proposed solutions posed a challenge to traditional opinion leadership, which typically involves aligning with and reinforcing group norms (Rogers and Cartano 1962). Thus, in response to these profound shifts in the information landscape, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1. *Aspirations to influence online decrease during a time of crisis.*

2.2 | The Impact of Political Trust on Aspirations to Influence Others During Crises

We propose that individuals' aspirations to influence online are shaped by the level of trust they place in political institutions and actors. Political trust refers to citizens' confidence in the capacity of institutions and leaders to act in the public interest and address societal challenges (Citrin and Stoker 2018). Trust functions as a societal glue; it simplifies a complex political landscape by allowing citizens to believe that their interests will be considered even without constant monitoring (Luhmann 1979). Political trust is both an affective attachment and an evaluative judgement, amounting to a comprehensive assessment of political actors and the expectation that they will uphold democratic norms (Hooghe 2011). At the same time, it is relational and conditional, extended selectively to particular actors and domains (Levi and Stoker 2000).

Understanding why trust predicts the aspiration to influence others is tied to expectations and their fulfilment (Baier 1986). Research has linked trust to political participation (Citrin and Stoker 2018) and to social capital more broadly, in which trust facilitates cooperation and lowers the perceived costs of collective action (Gabriel 2017). Institutionalised participation, such as voting or joining a party, reflects an acceptance of the political system and its normative expectations (Grönlund & Setälä 2007; Hooghe and Marien 2013).

Trust functions differently in non-institutional participation. Because trust entails risk, its violation generates discontent, which may prompt citizens to bypass traditional channels and act directly through protests, boycotts, or other forms of contention (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013; Braun and Hutter 2016). Social media participation is typically categorised as non-institutional (Bennett 2012), and studies have consistently linked it to lower political trust (Koivula et al. 2022; Waeterloos et al. 2023), echoing findings on face-to-face influence (Weimann 1994; Gamson 1968). In hybrid media systems, such participation becomes especially visible as institutional actors, journalists, and citizens operate in the same digital arenas and compete for influence (Chadwick 2017). As a result, social media platforms provide an effective avenue for translating low trust levels into political influence. Thus, we hypothesise:

H2. *High trust in political institutions decreases aspirations to influence.*

Political trust is highly responsive to contextual change, which can shape its role in citizens' willingness to influence others. During the COVID-19 pandemic, trust in political leaders initially increased (Esaiasson et al. 2020; Kritzinger et al. 2021), reflecting the classic 'rally'round the flag' effect (Mueller 1970). Unlike conventional trust drivers, such as economic satisfaction or generalised social trust (Schraff 2021), this surge was rooted in emotional responses, including fear, anxiety, and the need for security, which encouraged reliance on political institutions and national leaders (de León et al. 2022). In this context, many citizens delegated opinion leadership to political authorities rather than attempting to influence others themselves (Baker and Oneal 2001; Brody 1991).

However, evidence also shows that elevated trust tends to erode as crises become prolonged and political disagreements reemerge (Kritzinger et al. 2021). As compliance fatigue and dissatisfaction with government responses grow (Verbalyte and Eigmüller 2022), citizens may increasingly challenge official

narratives and assume more active roles in shaping public opinion (Zaller 1991). Taken together, this suggests that higher political trust during crises dampens aspirations to influence, as citizens rely more on authorities for communication. Conversely, as trust wanes, the motivation for citizen-initiated opinion leadership increases. Accordingly, we hypothesise:

H3. *During crises, high political trust reduces aspirations to influence, whereas declining trust increases them.*

2.3 | The Moderating Effect of Political Trust in Citizens' Social Media Communication During Crises

To understand how political trust shapes citizens' attempts to exert influence on social media during crises requires examining how trust and aspirations to influence interact in public discourse. User-generated content plays a central role in crisis communication, covering information production, filtration, and validation (Chew and Eysenbach 2010; Tsao et al. 2021). Active participation involves reacting to decision makers' messages (Utz et al. 2013; Xie et al. 2017) and may range from support and appreciation to criticism and rejection of prevailing opinions (Liu et al. 2011).

Citizens' motivations to participate in political communication often stem from a desire to bring about change by influencing government decisions (Shah et al. 2005; Shirky 2011). This aspiration highlights the role of individuals in shaping crisis discourse. Whether supportive or critical, influence attempts reflect both perceived expertise and a wish to persuade others, particularly within one's social network.

While previous studies have examined primarily organisational crisis communication (Utz et al. 2013; Schultz et al. 2011), our research focuses on how citizens respond to public governance and authorities. We propose that political trust shapes these responses in three ways. First, grievances and discontent often motivate online political discourse (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013). Second, research has found a link between trust and compliance: High levels of trust encourage adherence to recommendations and reduce public protest (Hetherington and Rudolph 2022; Gabriel 2017). Third, social media can serve as a channel for both expressing distrust in institutions (Koivula et al. 2022; Waeterloos et al. 2023) and supporting them (Groshek and Koc-Michalska 2017).

Due to conflicting findings in previous research, we propose the following parallel hypotheses:

H4a. *Political trust reduces the likelihood that aspirations to influence manifest as criticism of public administration during a crisis.*

H4b. *Political trust raises the likelihood that aspirations to influence manifest as support for public administration during a crisis.*

3 | Methodology

3.1 | Study Context

Our study is based in Finland, which provides a context of advanced ICT use and digital participation, two-phase pandemic management, and observable shifts in political trust and

party support during the pandemic years. The country combines high digital penetration with strong political institutions: Over 70% of adults actively use social media, and Finland consistently ranks among the global leaders in ICT infrastructure and digital literacy (Organisation for Economic Development [OECD] 2021).

The Finnish government pursued two distinct phases of pandemic management. In 2020, strict restrictions were imposed under the Emergency Law, closing schools, restaurants, and public spaces, and limiting mobility. These measures kept infection rates relatively low but also entailed unprecedented state intervention in daily life. By late 2021, however, the context had changed: The spread of Delta and Omicron variants had driven case numbers sharply upward. Rather than re-introducing full lockdowns, the government prioritised keeping society open, focusing on vaccination campaigns and applying targeted restrictions on gatherings.

Finland entered the pandemic with traditionally high levels of political trust (OECD 2021), and trust in national institutions increased further in the first year (Kestilä-Kekkonen et al. 2022). Party support initially followed a ‘rally round the flag’ pattern, with the governing Social Democratic Party gaining traction in early 2020. As the crisis persisted, however, this momentum gradually shifted towards the opposition National Coalition Party.

3.2 | Participants

This study relied on the *Digital Age in Finland* longitudinal survey, which tracked the same group of participants across four waves between 2017 and 2021. The initial survey (T1) was conducted in December 2017 with a probability sample of 3724 Finnish individuals aged 18–74 drawn from the Finnish Population Register, supplemented with respondents recruited via the Taloustutkimus Ltd. online panel.

The follow-up surveys proceeded in three phases. The second wave (T2) took place in spring 2019, with 1134 respondents (a response rate of 30.5% of the original sample). The third wave (T3) was fielded during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in May–June 2020, involving 735 respondents (64.8% of T1 respondents). The final wave (T4) was conducted in December 2021 with 543 respondents (73.9% of T2 respondents). This study focuses on the 543 participants who completed all three follow-up surveys (T2–T4).

The demographic composition of the balanced panel demonstrated good representativeness in terms of age (mean 48.1 years, SD 15.5) and gender distribution (52.8% male). However, as is common in longitudinal studies, the sample is skewed toward individuals with higher education (48.3% held a college or university degree) and pensioners (32.4%). Concerning attrition, a considerable number of participants discontinued participation across the survey waves, introducing shifts in representativeness. A detailed attrition analysis is provided in the Appendix, covering gender, age, education, and party affiliation at each measurement point. Importantly, because our analyses focused on within-person changes in political trust and influence aspirations, these modest patterns of attrition are unlikely to bias the estimated relationships (Gustavson et al. 2012).

All surveys were conducted in accordance with the principle of informed consent. Before participation, respondents were informed about the study's content and explicitly asked to consent to the collection of sensitive information, including political affiliation and health-related data concerning COVID-19. A separate privacy notice was provided to ensure transparency in data management. At each wave, participants renewed their consent to stay in the longitudinal panel and to allow storage of their contact information for follow-up purposes. In line with current standards of research transparency, metadata and measurement instruments used in this study are publicly available (see Koivula et al. 2020 for further details), while analysis scripts and survey data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

3.3 | Measures

A summary of the variables used is shown in Table 1. First, we constructed the variable ‘aspiration to influence’. Drawing on the two-step flow of communication model and previous research on opinion leadership, the measure incorporates elements, such as interactive use of social networks (Diehl et al. 2016; Huffaker 2010), producing and sharing political content (Weeks et al. 2017; Klein and Robison 2020), and self-perceived influencing (Weeks et al. 2017; Rogers and Cartano 1962). From this threefold starting point, we combined the following items: *I use social media to* (1) *share useful information with others*, (2) *express my political opinions*, and (3) *affect the opinions of others*. Optional responses were presented on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 5 (*completely agree*). The consistency of the variables was high, based on a pooled Cronbach's alpha score of 0.86.

Political trust is defined as citizens' confidence in the core political institutions and actors in a representative democracy. We used a measure previously applied in similar studies, combining trust in parliament, politicians, and political parties (Marien 2017; Kestilä-Kekkonen et al. 2022). Each item was presented in a consistent manner across different rounds of the survey—*How trustworthy do you consider the following?*—and was rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (*not trustworthy at all*) to 5 (*very trustworthy*). The internal consistency of the items scored 0.71 on the pooled Cronbach's alpha test. We used the measure as a continuous and time-varying variable to account for changes in political trust over the course of the study.

In the second phase, we examined citizens' participation in public crisis communication on social media. Following Neubaum et al. (2014), we constructed measures capturing two dimensions of crisis communication: (1) the use of social media to criticise public administration and (2) the use of social media to support public administration. The criticism construct was measured with three items (pooled $\alpha = 0.89$): (1) *to express criticism about the measures presented by authorities or other public sources*, (2) *to share information not presented by authorities or other public sources*, and (3) *to express criticism toward political actors*. Responses were recorded on a five-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). The support construct was measured with two items (pooled $\alpha = 0.87$): (1) *to express support for official recommendations during the pandemic* and (2) *to urge others to follow the recommendations and restrictions of authorities*.

TABLE 1 | Summary of the applied variables.

	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Aspirations to influence others on social media (T1–T4)	1896	2.14	0.89	1	5
Political trust (T1–T4)	1896	3.20	0.75	1	5
Criticising the public administration on social media (T3–T4)	920	1.37	0.75	1	5
Supporting the public administration on social media (T3–T4)	920	2.05	1.19	1	5
Political interest (T1–T4)	1893	6.39	2.58	0	10
Subjective political competence (T1–T4)	1892	7.7	1.66	0	10
Social media use frequency (T1–T4)	1885	3.33	1.22	1	5
Party preference (T2)					
Government	1881	0.55	0.50	0	1
Opposition	1881	0.34	0.48	0	1
Other/NA	1881	0.11	0.31	0	1
Birth year (T2)	1896	1970.6	15.5	1943	1999
Female (T2)	1896	0.49	0.50	0	1
Tertiary degree (T2)	1894	0.51	0.50	0	1

Note: Measurement points in parentheses: T1 = 12/2017, T2 = 3–4/2019, T3 = 5–6/2020, and T4 = 12/2021.

3.3.1 | Measurement Invariance

To ensure that the constructs were comparable across survey waves, we conducted longitudinal measurement invariance checks using multigroup confirmatory factor analysis. For aspiration to influence, the results supported configural, metric, and scalar invariance (all p -values for loadings and intercepts > 0.22), indicating consistent measurement across waves. For political trust, configural, metric, and scalar invariance was also supported (all p -values > 0.17). For criticism, configural and metric invariance was supported (all loadings were non-significant, $p > 0.30$), but scalar invariance was not, as intercepts for two items differed significantly across waves ($p = 0.007$ and $p = 0.036$). For support, which was measured with only two items, formal invariance testing was not feasible. Since our analyses are based on composite mean scores rather than latent means, we relied primarily on internal consistency (pooled α values ranging from 0.71 to 0.89), together with evidence of invariance testing, to justify comparability across survey waves.

3.3.2 | Control Variables

We acknowledge that aspirations to influence and political trust depend on interest in politics and subjective political competence, which can vary significantly among individuals (e.g., Kestilä-Kekkonen et al. 2022; Gamson 1968). We assessed political competence by asking respondents to rate their understanding of political issues on a scale from 0 (*very poor*) to 10 (*very good*). Additionally, political interest was measured on an 11-point scale that asked respondents to rate their level of interest in politics based on the question, ‘How would you rate your interest in politics on a scale from 0 (*not at all interested*) to 10 (*very interested*)?’ in each round of the study. By including these variables in our analyses, we sought to ensure that these potentially confounding factors did not influence our results.

Through our analyses, we controlled for the frequency of social media use, age, education, gender, and party preference. Social media use was assessed by asking respondents about the frequency of their engagement with various social network

platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*many hours per day*). Age was measured in years, and gender was treated as binary. Education considered three categories: ‘primary’, ‘secondary’, and ‘tertiary’. Party preference was measured by inquiring, ‘Which of the following parties would you vote for if the parliamentary elections were held now?’ in the second round, 1 month before the 2019 parliamentary elections. In the analysis, we compared respondents according to whether their preferred party was in government or in opposition throughout the COVID-19 period. We also distinguished respondents who did not express a party preference or who supported a minor party.

3.4 | Data Analysis

We used a longitudinal design to study how aspirations to influence others on social media evolved during the COVID-19 crisis and how these were shaped by political trust. All four waves of panel data were used, applying random effects within-between (REWB) models (also known as hybrid models) to exploit both within-individual and between-individual variations (Bell et al. 2019). The REWB models decompose time-varying predictors into two components: the within-person effect, captured by the wave-specific deviation from an individual’s overall mean, and the between-person effect, represented by the individual’s mean across all waves. This structure allowed us to distinguish short-term changes from stable individual differences.

In the first phase, we analysed how influencing aspirations and political trust evolved among the participants during the study period. Subsequently, we examined whether political trust predicts the aspiration to influence others on social media. First, we formed a baseline REWB model that included political trust and relevant covariates. Second, we added time indicators (measurement waves) to capture period-specific effects. In the final model, we estimated a cross-level interaction between between-person political trust and within-person time, allowing

us to assess whether temporal changes in aspirations to influence were conditioned by individuals' overall levels of trust.

In the second phase, we focused on the COVID-19 period (final two waves) to analyse how political trust moderates the relationship between changes in aspirations to influence and crisis-related social media behaviour, specifically the expression of political criticism and political support. Here again, we employed REWB models with cross-level interactions, treating political trust as a between-level moderator and aspirations to influence as a within-level predictor. Additionally, within-person variations in political trust were included to account for dynamic trust changes over time.

All models included random intercepts to account for baseline differences in outcomes. In models with cross-level interactions, we further specified random slopes for the relevant within-person predictors (time and aspirations to influence), allowing the effect of these variables to vary across individuals.

4 | Results

Figure 1 shows the longitudinal changes in the respondents' aspirations to influence and political trust. The results revealed that participants' aspirations to influence in general were significantly lower during the COVID-19 pandemic than before. The findings indicate that the levels of aspirations to influence were lower at the third measurement point ($B = -0.101$, $p = 0.008$) and at the fourth measurement point ($B = -0.270$, $p < 0.001$) when compared to the second point. Additionally, the results showed that the trend in political trust reversed at the fourth point after the apparent increase at the third measurement point.

Next, we analysed the longitudinal relationship between respondents' aspirations to influence and political trust. The results presented in Table 2 show a negative association between political trust and aspirations to influence at both the within-individual ($B = -0.09$, $p = 0.02$) and between-individual ($B = -0.11$, $p = 0.05$) levels. That is, higher levels of political trust were associated with lower levels of aspiration to influence. Substantively, the estimated coefficients indicate that a

one-point difference in political trust was associated with an approximately 2% difference in individuals' aspirations to influence others online.

The within-individual results further indicated that higher levels of political interest, subjective political competence, and social media activity were associated with higher aspirations to influence. At the between-individual level, higher average aspirations to influence were observed among respondents with higher political interest, greater social media activity, and younger age. No statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$) were observed with respect to political competence, education, party preference, or gender.

We next examined how the association between political trust and aspirations to influence varied across measurement points. After including time in the model, the main association with political trust was clearly declined, suggesting that the negative association was closely linked to specific waves in the data. We then estimated a model including an interaction between survey waves and respondents' mean level of political trust. This interaction was not statistically significant. However, as illustrated in Figure 2, aspirations to influence showed a more pronounced decline during the pandemic period (between wave 3 and wave 4) among respondents with high or moderate levels of trust, whereas no comparable pattern was observed among those with low trust. Importantly, the results did not indicate an increase in aspirations to influence among individuals with low or very low levels of political trust.

Finally, we examined how aspiration to influence and political trust were longitudinally related to participation in public crisis communication, focusing on criticism and support of the public administration on social media. The results are presented in Table 3. The within-respondent analyses indicated that changes in political trust were not associated with changes in criticism ($B = 0.07$, $p = 0.205$), but were weakly associated with higher levels of support for the administration ($B = 0.17$, $p = 0.054$). Changes in aspiration to influence were positively associated with both criticism ($B = 0.174$, $p < 0.001$) and support for the administration ($B = 0.185$, $p = 0.002$). The between-individual analyses showed that individuals with higher overall levels of political trust expressed lower levels of criticism ($B = -0.228$,

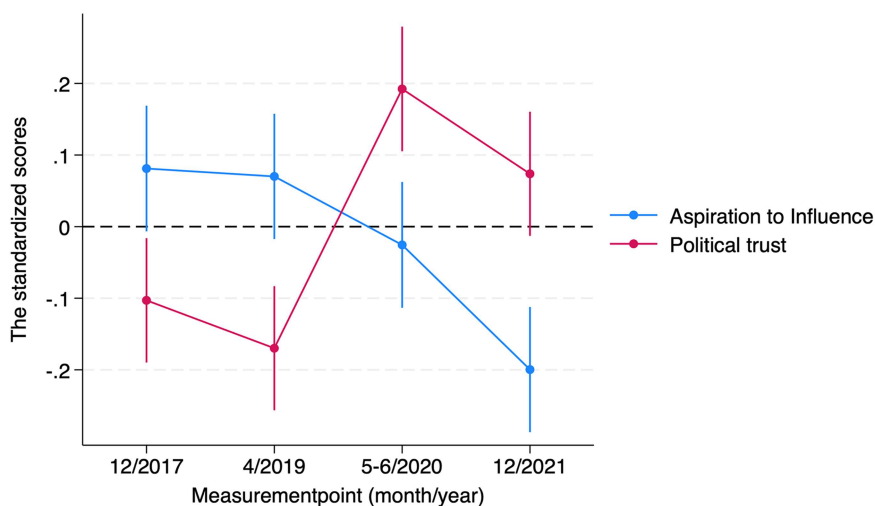


FIGURE 1 | Changes in aspirations to influence and political trust between 2017 and 2021. The standardised scores with confidence intervals (95%).

TABLE 2 | The effects of political trust, measurement point, and covariate variables on aspirations to influence. The REWB-models.

Variables	Aspirations to influence					
	M1		M2		M3	
Level 1 (within individuals)						
Political trust	-0.09*	(0.04)	-0.05	(0.04)	-0.04	(0.04)
Time: T2 (4/2019)			Ref.		Ref.	
T1 (12/2017)			0.02	(0.04)	0.05	(0.19)
T3 (5-6/2020)			-0.09*	(0.04)	-0.11	(0.19)
T4 (12/2021)			-0.16**	(0.05)	-0.03	(0.19)
Political interest	0.03*	(0.01)	0.04*	(0.01)	0.04**	(0.01)
Political competence	0.06***	(0.02)	0.07***	(0.02)	0.05**	(0.02)
Social media activity	0.10***	(0.01)	0.05**	(0.02)	0.05	(0.02)
Level 2 (between individuals)						
Political trust	-0.11*	(0.05)	-0.12*	(0.05)	-0.10	(0.06)
Political interest	0.08***	(0.02)	0.09***	(0.02)	0.09***	(0.02)
Political competence	0.04	(0.03)	0.04	(0.03)	0.02	(0.03)
Social media activity	0.36***	(0.04)	0.36***	(0.04)	0.25***	(0.03)
Party: opposition (Ref.)						
Other/NA	-0.06	(0.08)	-0.06	(0.08)	-0.05	(0.08)
Government	-0.08	(0.13)	-0.07	(0.13)	-0.06	(0.13)
Birth year	-0.00	(0.00)	-0.00	(0.00)	-0.00	(0.00)
Female	-0.02	(0.07)	-0.02	(0.07)	-0.04	(0.07)
High education	-0.10 ⁺	(0.06)	-0.09	(0.06)	-0.08	(0.06)
Cross-level interaction						
T2 * political trust (between)					Ref.	
T1 * political trust (between)					0.00	(0.05)
T3 * political trust (between)					0.00	(0.05)
T4 * political trust (between)					-0.07	(0.05)
Random-effect variance components						
Random intercept (individual)	0.640	(0.024)	0.644	(0.023)	0.627	(0.037)
Random slope for time					0.494	(0.037)
Residual	0.517	(0.009)	0.501	(0.009)	0.492	(0.010)
Observations	1853		1853		1853	
Number of individuals	512		512		512	

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

⁺ $p < 0.1$.

$p < 0.001$) and higher levels of support for the administration ($B = 0.228$, $p < 0.001$). In addition, higher average levels of aspiration to influence were associated with higher levels of both criticism ($B = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$) and support for the administration ($B = 0.67$, $p < 0.001$).

To examine our fourth dual hypothesis, a cross-level interaction term between political trust and aspiration to influence was included in the second set of models. The results were consistent with H4a, showing that the association between aspiration to influence and criticism of the administration was weaker at higher levels of political trust ($B = -0.138$, $p = 0.005$). In contrast, H4b was not supported, as the association between aspiration to influence and support for the administration did not vary significantly across levels of political trust ($B = 0.034$, $p = 0.664$).

Figure 3 illustrates these interaction patterns. The plots show that higher aspirations to influence were associated with higher levels of both criticism and support for governance. For criticism, this association differed by level of political trust: when political trust was one standard deviation below the mean, aspiration to influence was more strongly associated with criticism than when political trust was higher. No comparable interaction pattern was observed for support for governance during the crisis.

5 | Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to examine how political trust affected citizens' aspirations to influence others on social media during the COVID-19 crisis. Specifically, we

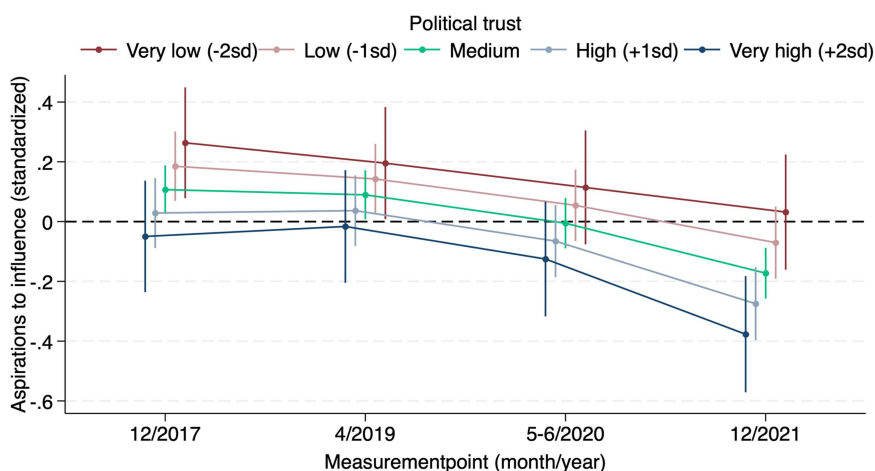


FIGURE 2 | The cross-level interaction between political trust (between individuals) and measurement point (within individuals) when predicting changes in aspirations to influence. The standardised scores with confidence intervals (95%) from the REWB models.

TABLE 3 | The effects of political trust, aspirations to influence, and covariate variables on criticism and support for public administration during the COVID-crisis. The REWB-models.

Variables	Criticising the public administration				Supporting the public administration			
	M1		M2		M1		M2	
Within individuals								
Political trust	0.053	(0.054)	0.058	(0.054)	0.111	(0.087)	0.106	(0.087)
Aspirations to influence	0.236***	(0.041)	0.649***	(0.194)	0.232***	(0.066)	0.100	(0.305)
Political interest	-0.025	(0.020)	-0.022	(0.020)	-0.032	(0.033)	-0.032	(0.033)
Political competence	0.045	(0.027)	0.039	(0.027)	-0.022	(0.043)	-0.021	(0.043)
Social media activity	0.014	(0.040)	0.012	(0.040)	0.034	(0.065)	0.033	(0.065)
Between individuals								
Political trust	-0.221***	(0.041)	-0.226***	(0.041)	0.242***	(0.061)	0.243***	(0.061)
Aspirations to influence	0.409***	(0.037)	0.409***	(0.037)	0.771***	(0.055)	0.771***	(0.055)
Political interest	0.000	(0.017)	0.000	(0.016)	-0.024	(0.024)	-0.024	(0.024)
Political competence	-0.036	(0.026)	-0.036	(0.026)	0.030	(0.038)	0.031	(0.038)
Social media activity	0.013	(0.026)	0.012	(0.025)	0.146***	(0.038)	0.147***	(0.038)
Government party	-0.197***	(0.058)	-0.195***	(0.057)	0.120	(0.085)	0.120	(0.085)
No party preference	-0.229*	(0.096)	-0.236*	(0.096)	0.025	(0.142)	0.029	(0.142)
Birth year	-0.229*	(0.096)	-0.236*	(0.096)	0.025	(0.142)	0.029	(0.142)
Female	-0.229*	(0.096)	-0.236*	(0.096)	0.025	(0.142)	0.029	(0.142)
High education	-0.229*	(0.096)	-0.236*	(0.096)	0.025	(0.142)	0.029	(0.142)
Cross-level interaction								
Asp. to influence (within) x political trust (between)			-0.133**	(0.060)			0.044	(0.095)
Random-effect variance components								
Intercept (individuals)	0.214	(0.023)	0.219	(0.034)	0.401	(0.051)	0.401	(0.050)
Slope for aspiration to influence			0.023	(0.030)			0.023	(0.071)
Residual (individual)	0.199	(0.014)	0.197	(0.014)	0.549	(0.038)	0.544	(0.040)
Observations	898		898		898		898	
Number of individuals	488		488		488		488	

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

+ $p < 0.1$.

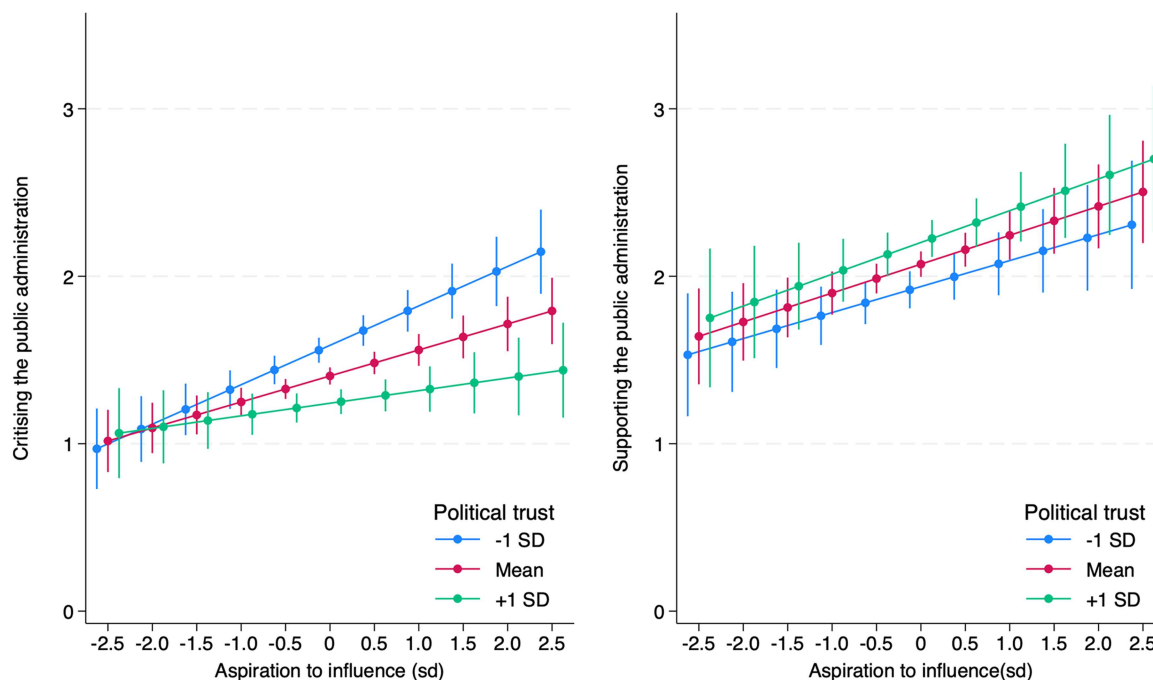


FIGURE 3 | The cross-level interaction between aspirations to influence (within individuals) and political trust (between individuals) when predicting the criticising and supporting public administration in social media during COVID-19. Predicted scores with confidence intervals (95%) post-estimated from the REWB models presented in Table 3.

examined how this relationship evolved during the first 2 years of the pandemic in Finland. Furthermore, we explored how the complex dynamics between citizens' aspirations to influence and their levels of political trust resulted in contrasting ways of communicating about the pandemic.

To confirm our first hypothesis (H1), we found that, at a general level, aspiration to influence decreased during the early stages of the pandemic when information about the disease, its symptoms, cures, and prevention was very uncertain. This supports our theoretical expectation that crisis conditions undermine the key attributes of opinion leadership, such as perceived expertise and communicative confidence (Bandura 1977; Rogers and Cartano 1962). When individuals lack clear and reliable information, their willingness to take on persuasive roles diminishes. In this respect, while social media offers a platform for broad participation, our results show that, in times of epistemic uncertainty, this potential is not always realised. This also means that the absence of reliable information creates more space for unreliable actors to take over opinion leadership, resulting in the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories (Dow et al. 2021).

Our analyses confirmed the second hypothesis (H2), revealing a negative association between high political trust and aspirations to influence during a crisis. This finding is consistent with our theoretical framework, which conceptualised that high trust would reduce individuals' perceived need to engage in persuasive efforts. When citizens trust political institutions to act in their interests, they may feel less personal responsibility to shape public opinion or hold leaders accountable in public forums. In this way, political trust operates as a psychological substitute for active participation, reflecting the normative expectations embedded in institutions' performance (Gamson 1968; Hooghe and Marien 2013).

However, interpreting these results became a more complex task when considering the crisis period. Despite the absence of statistically significant interactions and confirmation of the third hypothesis (H3), the interaction analyses between political trust and the crisis period suggested that the negative effect of political trust was significantly influenced by the societal conditions at the time of data collection. This period coincided with a levelling off in the earlier 'rally round the flag' surge in political trust (Esaiasson et al. 2020; Johansson et al. 2021). The adverse influence of political trust was particularly evident at the final measurement point, approximately a year and a half after the onset of the pandemic. The pattern suggests that, while trust continued to reduce aspirations to influence, its impact was shaped by broader societal dynamics and public mood over the course of the crisis.

In the second part of our study, aligned with the first part of our fourth hypothesis (H4a), we found that high levels of political trust reduced the tendency to criticise the administration, even when the aspiration to influence increased. At the same time, low trust with strong aspirations to influence predicted more active engagement on social media in criticising governing bodies. However, H4b was not supported, as high trust did not increase the manifestation of aspiration to influence in support of governance during the crisis. Thus, it seems that the aspirations to influence only motivate individuals with low trust to participate more actively, and this is primarily expressed through criticism. However, people who trust do not convert their influencing aspirations into active support in the same way.

Our findings indicate that political trust plays a differentiating role in individuals' behaviour during times of crisis. Extending prior research linking political trust to institutional participation (Citrin and Stoker 2018; Druckman 2022), we found that

high levels of trust are associated with lower aspiration to influence, while those who are sceptical of political institutions continue to strive to influence as before. This pattern is particularly relevant for debates on digital democracy, as it suggests that online participatory spaces may become selectively populated depending on citizens' trust orientations.

These findings, therefore, add nuance to what we already knew about trust and non-institutional participation. Prior research has shown that citizens with low trust are more likely to engage in extra-institutional activities (Hooghe and Marien 2013). Our study confirms this tendency in the digital sphere and adds a qualification: During the crisis, low-trust individuals not only maintained their aspirations to influence but also used social media disproportionately to criticise the authorities. High-trust citizens, in contrast, quelled their aspirations to influence, effectively muting their voices in the online arena. In this way, the crisis amplified the relative visibility of low-trust people and silenced the high-trust people. From a digital governance perspective, this asymmetry implies that online public debate during crises may systematically overrepresent critical or sceptical voices, even in contexts where institutional trust remains relatively high at the population level.

These findings support prior research indicating that opponents of pandemic policies dominated online discourse (Verbalyte and Eigmüller 2022), largely because supporters refrained from participating. To refine this approach, we suggest that a high level of political trust may function as a silencing factor, especially during a societal crisis. In such contexts, fragmented information and heightened uncertainty challenge citizens' ability to navigate complex media environments. Supporters of official measures may have lacked the confidence needed to express their views with certainty. Consequently, as the crisis generated a climate of uncertainty in our societies, it may have promoted trust to a deactivating and silencing role with regard to citizen participation, while distrust activated engagement, particularly in online discussions. This has implications for misinformation management, as the withdrawal of trustful and supportive citizens may reduce the presence of corrective, experience-based, or institutionally aligned narratives in online discussions.

These results also speak to a broader theoretical point: they suggest that the patterns observed are not unique to the COVID-19 case. Crises generally share conditions, such as heightened uncertainty, contested authority, and volatile information environments, which recalibrate the relationship between political trust and participation. In such contexts, political trust appears to function less as a linear correlate of engagement and more as a contextual moderator shaping how and by whom digital participation is expressed. Accordingly, our findings contribute to a more general framework for understanding how crises reshape digital political discourse and participation. Similar patterns are likely to emerge during financial crashes, environmental disasters, migration emergencies, or legitimacy scandals.

From a governance perspective, this highlights the relevance of approaches, such as those advanced by the European Union through the Digital Services Act (DSA, Regulation EU 2022/2065), and the European Democracy Action Plan, which aim to protect open debate while promoting pluralistic representation

and resilience against communicative distortions in digital environments, for example through enhanced transparency of platform moderation practices and systemic measures to counter disinformation. In line with the DSA, measures aimed at limiting algorithmic steering can help mitigate the disproportionate amplification of minority or highly sceptical viewpoints on social media. Overall, greater algorithmic transparency enables users to understand why certain content is displayed. This makes it easier to identify whether recommendation systems amplify specific viewpoints, thereby introducing political bias by overrepresenting controversial content.

Looking ahead to future crises, our findings carry two important lessons for governments and crisis communication professionals. Policymakers and communicators should avoid relying on social media feedback as a straightforward indicator of public opinion, since online discourse tends to reflect the views of low trust and sceptical citizens disproportionately. Importantly, silence on social media should not be automatically interpreted as disengagement or apathy; in many cases, it signals trust in and acceptance of authorities' decisions. Similarly, very high levels of trust, while beneficial for compliance, may unintentionally reduce citizens' willingness to participate in public debate. From a democratic perspective, this creates a risk: If only the distrustful remain vocal online, political conversations become skewed toward critical voices. Authorities must therefore balance the benefits of trust with the need to actively encourage constructive participation among supportive citizens, ensuring that crises do not distort democratic deliberation in the digital sphere.

Policy interventions could, therefore, focus on creating low-threshold, non-confrontational participation channels that do not require public visibility. In several European contexts, participatory tools, such as *Your Voice in Europe*, national *Otakantaa* platforms in Finland, and invitation-based digital citizen panels have been used to gather input without requiring open social media engagement. In addition, deliberative mini-publics facilitate decision-making by providing a structured means of gathering the views of citizens who prefer institutionally mediated participation. Prior research indicates that these processes can foster political trust and reduce perceived distance between citizens and decision-makers (Setälä et al. 2023; Setälä 2017).

As correlations between political trust and social media influencing are closely related to society's contextual factors, our results are not directly generalisable to other national contexts or other crises. Additionally, it may be that the self-selected respondents in our sample do not represent the general Finnish public. In particular, the sample is skewed in favour of highly educated individuals, which may affect the representativeness of different levels of trust. Future research should therefore rely on more heterogeneous samples to capture a wider range of perspectives. Nevertheless, while these kinds of longitudinal surveys always suffer from self-selection, they provide crucial knowledge that facilitates monitoring changes in participants' attitudes and behaviour in a precise manner. While our quantitative analysis offers important insights, incorporating in-depth qualitative methods is essential to uncover deeper connections between political trust and influencing behaviour. Such methods would provide a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play.

Overall, this study provides new information on the multiple contours of political trust and political influence on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic, an episode that can be seen as the most prominent crisis to date in the 21st century. To our knowledge, this is the first study to show that, in general, citizens did not seek to influence others more during the pandemic than before. Instead, our findings suggest that aspirations to influence others' opinions on social media declined. Further, during the pandemic, political influence became concentrated among certain individuals, especially those with low trust in politicians and political institutions. Accordingly, in line with previous research on trust and social media participation (Koivula et al. 2022; Waeterloos et al. 2023), it appears that when citizens perceive their views as absent from public discourse surrounding a crisis, low trust may motivate them to express their opinions on social media. From a policy perspective, the results highlight that crisis communication in digital environments can intensify imbalance in participation and visibility, shaping public debate in ways that extend beyond the spread of misinformation alone. Ethical digital governance therefore requires not only efforts to address misleading content, but also careful consideration of who participates, whose voices are amplified, and whose remain silent.

Acknowledgments

Open access publishing facilitated by Turun yliopisto, as part of the Wiley - FinELib agreement. This research has been supported by the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation (9/2021), the Research Council of Finland (320162, 334157), and the Kone Foundation (12/2024). Open access publishing facilitated by Turun yliopisto, as part of the Wiley - FinELib agreement.

Ethics Statement

No ethics approval was required for this study. The research does not involve any intervention in the physical integrity of participants, does not include minors under the age of 15 without guardian consent, and does not expose participants to strong stimuli or psychological stress beyond normal everyday life. All data used in the study were collected based on informed consent and do not contain sensitive personal information. Participation did not deviate from the principle of informed consent, and there is no risk of physical or mental harm or security threats to the participants, their relatives, or the researchers. Therefore, in accordance with Finnish ethical guidelines, separate ethics committee approval was not necessary.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The initial dataset used in this study is already publicly available (<https://urn.fi/urn:nbn:fi:fsd:T-FSD3500>). The longitudinal data will be made openly available by the end of the year.

References

Baier, A. 1986. "Trust and Antitrust." *Ethics* 96: 231–260.

Baker, W. D., and J. R. Oneal. 2001. "Patriotism or Opinion Leadership? The Nature and Origins of the 'Rally 'Round the Flag' Effect." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45, no. 5: 661–687.

Bandura, A. 1977. "Self-Efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change." *Psychological Review* 84, no. 2: 191–215.

Bell, A., M. Fairbrother, and K. Jones. 2019. "Fixed and Random Effects Models: Making an Informed Choice." *Quality & Quantity* 53: 1051–1074.

Bennett, W. L. 2012. "The Personalization of Politics: Political Identity, Social Media, and Changing Patterns of Participation." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 644, no. 1: 20–39.

Bouckaert, G., and S. Van de Walle. 2003. "Comparing Measures of Citizen Trust and User Satisfaction as Indicators of 'Good Governance': Difficulties in Linking Trust and Satisfaction Indicators." *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 69, no. 3: 329–343.

Braun, D., and S. Hutter. 2016. "Political Trust, Extra-Representational Participation, and the Openness of Political Systems." *International Political Science Review* 37, no. 2: 151–165.

Brody, R. 1991. *Assessing the President: The Media, Elite Opinion, and Public Support*. Stanford University Press.

Burt, R. S. 1999. "The Social Capital of Opinion Leaders." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 566, no. 1: 37–54.

Citrin, J., and L. Stoker. 2018. "Political Trust in a Cynical Age." *Annual Review of Political Science* 21, no. 1: 49–70.

Chadwick, A. 2017. *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power*. Oxford University Press.

Chen, Q., C. Min, W. Zhang, G. Wang, X. Ma, and R. Evans. 2020. "Unpacking the Black Box: How to Promote Citizen Engagement Through Government Social Media During the COVID-19 Crisis." *Computers in Human Behavior* 110: 106380.

Chew, C., and G. Eysenbach. 2010. "Pandemics in the Age of Twitter: Content Analysis of Tweets During the 2009 H1N1 Outbreak." *PLoS One* 5, no. 11: e14118.

Christensen, T., and P. Lægreid. 2020. "Balancing Governance Capacity and Legitimacy: How the Norwegian Government Handled the COVID-19 Crisis as a High Performer." *Public Administration Review* 80, no. 5: 774–779.

Diehl, T., B. E. Weeks, and H. Gil de Zúñiga. 2016. "Political Persuasion on Social Media: Tracing Direct and Indirect Effects of News Use and Social Interaction." *New Media & Society* 18, no. 9: 1875–1895.

Dow, B. J., A. L. Johnson, C. S. Wang, J. Whitson, and T. Menon. 2021. "The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Search for Structure: Social Media and Conspiracy Theories." *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 15, no. 9: e12636.

Druckman, J. N. 2022. "A Framework for the Study of Persuasion." *Annual Review of Political Science* 25, no. 1: 65–88.

Esaiasson, P., J. Sohlberg, M. Gherstet, and B. Johansson. 2021. "How the Coronavirus Crisis Affects Citizen Trust in Institutions and in Unknown Others: Evidence From 'The Swedish Experiment'." *European Journal of Political Research* 60: 748–760.

Gabriel, O. 2017. "Participation and Political Trust." In *Handbook on Political Trust*, edited by S. Zmerli and T. Van der Meer, 302–315. Edward Elgar.

Gamson, W. A. 1968. *Power and Discontent*. Dorsey Press.

Gil de Zúñiga, H., M. Barnidge, and T. Diehl. 2018. "Political Persuasion on Social Media: A Moderated Moderation Model of Political Discussion Disagreement and Civil Reasoning." *Information Society* 34, no. 5: 302–315.

Gil de Zúñiga, H., P. González-González, and M. Goyanes. 2025. "Pathways to Political Persuasion: Linking Online, Social Media, and Fake News With Political Attitude Change Through Political Discussion." *American Behavioral Scientist* 69, no. 2: 240–261.

- Grönlund, K., and M. Setälä. 2007. "Political Trust, Satisfaction and Voter Turnout." *Comparative European Politics* 5, no. 4: 400–422.
- Groshek, J., and K. Koc-Michalska. 2017. "Helping Populism Win? Social Media Use, Filter Bubbles, and Support for Populist Presidential Candidates in the 2016 US Election Campaign." *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 9: 1389–1407.
- Gustavson, K., T. von Soest, E. Karevold, and E. Røysamb. 2012. "Attrition and Generalizability in Longitudinal Studies: Findings From a 15-Year Population-Based Study and a Monte Carlo Simulation Study." *BMC Public Health* 12, no. 1. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-12-918>.
- Hetherington, M. J., and T. J. Rudolph. 2022. "The Nature of Political Trust in Mass Publics." In *Handbook on Politics and Public Opinion*, edited by T. J. Rudolph, 356–369. Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800379619.00040>.
- Hooghe, M. 2011. "Why There is Basically Only One Form of Political Trust." *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 13, no. 2: 269–275. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-856x.2010.00447.x>.
- Hooghe, M., and S. Marien. 2013. "A Comparative Analysis of the Relation Between Political Trust and Forms of Political Participation in Europe." *European Societies* 15, no. 1: 131–152.
- Huffaker, D. 2010. "Dimensions of Leadership and Social Influence in Online Communities." *Human Communication Research* 36, no. 4: 593–617.
- Johansson, B., D. N. Hopmann, and A. Shehata. 2021. "When the rally-around-the-flag effect disappears, or: when the COVID-19 pandemic becomes "normalized". Supplement." *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 31, no. S1: 321–334.
- Katz, E., and P. F. Lazarsfeld. 1955. *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications*. Free Press.
- Keller, E. B., and J. L. Berry. 2003. *The Influentials: One American in Ten Tells the Other Nine How to Vote, Where to Eat, and What to Buy*. Simon & Schuster.
- Kestilä-Kekkonen, E., A. Koivula, and A. Tiihonen. 2022. "When Trust Is Not Enough: A Longitudinal Analysis of Political Trust and Political Competence During the First Wave of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Finland." *European Political Science Review* 14, no. 3: 424–440.
- Klein, E., and J. Robison. 2020. "Like, Post, and Distrust? How Social Media Use Affects Trust in Government." *Political Communication* 37, no. 1: 46–64.
- Koivula, A., S. Malinen, and A. Saarinen. 2022. "The Voice of Distrust? The Relationship Between Political Trust, Online Political Participation, and Voting." *Journal of Trust Research* 11, no. 1: 59–74.
- Koivula, A., E. Vainio, J. Sivonen, and J. Uotinen. 2020. Working Papers in Economic Sociology: Research Report on Finland in the Digital Age Round 3 Panel –Survey [Online]. University of Turku. <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-29-8332-2>.
- Kritzinger, S., M. Foucault, R. Lachat, J. Partheymüller, C. Plescia, and S. Brouard. 2021. "'Rally Round the Flag': The COVID-19 Crisis and Trust in the National Government." *West European Politics* 44, no. 5–6: 1205–1231.
- Levi, M., and L. Stoker. 2000. "Political Trust and Trustworthiness." *Annual Review of Political Science* 3, no. 1: 475–507.
- de León, E., M. Makhortkykh, T. Gil-Lopez, A. Urman, and S. Adam. 2022. News, Threats, and Trust: How COVID-19 News Shaped Political Trust, and How Threat Perceptions Conditioned This Relationship. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*.
- Liu, B. F., L. Austin, and Y. Jin. 2011. "How Publics Respond to Crisis Communication Strategies: The Interplay of Information Form and Source." *Public Relations Review* 37, no. 4: 345–353.
- Luhmann, N. 1979. *Trust and Power*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Malinen, S., and A. Koivula. 2024. "Cognitive Authorities of COVID-19 Information: Educational Differences and Outcomes of Trust in Health Experts and Social Media Influencers in Finland." *Information Research an International Electronic Journal* 29, no. 2: 71–91. <https://doi.org/10.47989/ir292713>.
- Marien, S. 2017. "The Measurement Equivalence of Political Trust." In *Handbook on Political Trust*, edited by S. Zmerli and T. W. G. van der Meer, 89–103. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Mueller, J. E. 1970. "Presidential Popularity From Truman to Johnson." *American Political Science Review* 64, no. 1: 18–34.
- Neubaum, G., L. Rösner, A. M. Rosenthal-von der Pütten, and N. C. Krämer. 2014. "Psychosocial Functions of Social Media Usage in a Disaster Situation: A Multi-Methodological Approach." *Computers in Human Behavior* 34: 28–38. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.01.021>.
- OECD. 2021. *Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions in Finland*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/52600c9e-en>.
- Regulation (EU). 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market For Digital Services and Amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act). <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2022/2065/oj>.
- Rogers, E. M., and D. G. Cartano. 1962. "Methods of Measuring Opinion Leadership." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 26: 435–441.
- Schraff, D. 2021. "Political Trust During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Rally Around the Flag or Lockdown Effects?" *European Journal of Political Research* 60, no. 4: 1007–1017.
- Schultz, F., S. Utz, and A. Göritz. 2011. "Is the Medium the Message? Perceptions of and Reactions to Crisis Communication Via Twitter, Blogs, and Traditional Media." *Public Relations Review* 37, no. 1: 20–27.
- Setälä, M. 2017. "Connecting Deliberative Mini-Publics to Representative Decision Making." *European Journal of Political Research* 56, no. 4: 846–863.
- Setälä, M., H. Serup Christensen, M. Leino, and K. Strandberg. 2023. "Beyond Polarization and Selective Trust: A Citizens' Jury as a Trusted Source of Information." *Politics* 43, no. 4: 472–488.
- Shah, D. V., J. Cho, W. P. Eveland, Jr., and N. Kwak. 2005. "Information and Expression in a Digital Age: Modeling Internet Effects on Civic Participation." *Communication Research* 32, no. 5: 531–565.
- Shirky, C. 2011. "The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change." *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 1: 28–41.
- Van Stekelenburg, J., and B. Klandermans. 2013. "The Social Psychology of Protest." *Current Sociology* 61, no. 5–6: 886–905.
- Tsao, S. F., H. Chen, T. Tisseverasinghe, Y. Yang, L. Li, and Z. A. Butt. 2021. "What Social Media Told Us in the Time of COVID-19: A Scoping Review." *Lancet Digital Health* 3, no. 3: e175–e194.
- Utz, S., F. Schultz, and S. Glocka. 2013. "Crisis Communication Online: How Medium, Crisis Type and Emotions Affected Public Reactions in the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Disaster." *Public Relations Review* 39, no. 1: 40–46.
- Verbalyte, M., and M. Eigmüller. 2022. "COVID-19 Related Social Media Use and Attitudes Towards Pandemic Control Measures in Europe." *Culture, Practice & Europeanization* 7, no. 1: 37–67.
- Waeterloos, C., M. Walrave, and K. Ponnet. 2023. "Social Media as an Exit Strategy? The Role of Attitudes of Discontent in Explaining Non-Electoral Political Participation Among Belgian Young Adults." *Acta Politica* 11: 1–30.
- Weeks, B. E., A. Ardèvol-Abreu, and H. Gil de Zúñiga. 2017. "Online Influence? Social Media Use, Opinion Leadership, and Political Persuasion." *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 29, no. 2: 214–239.
- Weimann, G. 1994. *The Influentials: People Who Influence People*. Suny press.

Xie, Y., R. Qiao, G. Shao, and H. Chen. 2017. "Research on Chinese Social Media Users' Communication Behaviors During Public Emergency Events." *Telematics and Informatics* 34, no. 3: 740–754.

Yoon, N., J. Hemsley, A. Smith, E. Simpson, and J. Eakins. 2022. "Super-Amplifiers! The Role of Twitter Extended Party Networks in Political Elections." *Policy & Internet* 14, no. 3: 711–730.

Zaller, J. 1991. "Information, Values, and Opinion." *American Political Science Review* 85, no. 4: 1215–1237.

Zhuravskaya, E., M. Petrova, and R. Enikolopov. 2020. "Political Effects of the Internet and Social Media." *Annual Review of Economics* 12: 415–438.

Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.
Appendix.