Trust and Involvement as Higher-Order Factors of General Attitudes Towards Politics. Testing a Structural Model Across 26 Democracies

Laurits Bromme
University of Koblenz-Landau

Tobias Rothmund
Friedrich Schiller University Jena

Interindividual differences in how people think and feel about politics have been investigated for decades. However, the great number of attitudinal concepts that has been developed to describe these differences is likely to distract from their conceptual overlap and dimensional structure. In addition, not much is known about the cross-cultural invariance of their interrelation. We propose that attitudes towards politics can be structured by two broad higher-order factors, a factor of general political involvement and a factor of general political trust. In two studies ($N_1 = 767$; $N_2 = 29,018$), including representative samples from 26 democracies, we first conduct several confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) to show that the higher-order model is a well-fitting and parsimonious alternative to a baseline model without higher-order factors in most samples. Second, we present evidence from multigroup CFA that the overall patterns of factor loadings are the same across all 26 countries. We interpret this structural equivalence across different democracies as support for the assumption that general political involvement and general political trust reflect basic orientations towards politics that are based on (1) demands of democratic political systems and (2) universal principles in human trait structure.

KEY WORDS: political attitudes, political trust, political involvement, structural invariance, higher-order factors, human universals

The way people relate to politics has crucial implications for democratic societies. An effective and stable democratic government requires citizens’ trust (Citrin & Muste, 1999; Marien & Hooghe, 2011), but also vigilance and participation (Geissel, 2008; Martín & van Deth, 2007). Accordingly, individual differences in people’s attitudes towards politics have been investigated in political science for decades (e.g., Almond & Verba, 1963/1989; Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954; Verba & Nie, 1972), leading to a great number of trait concepts (e.g., political trust, political interest, internal efficacy, etc.). However, this multitude of concepts raises the question of their overall dimensionality. Based on theoretical considerations and previous empirical findings, we propose a structural model, with general political involvement and general political trust as higher-order factors.

As a second goal, we aim to test the invariance of this higher-order model across a wide range of democracies. So far, limited research has compared the structural relation of these attitudes across
democracies, which is surprising because a common dimensional structure would provide evidence for a universal pattern in how individuals relate to politics in democratic societies. Such a finding is likely to be informed by two different sources of variance, the demands of democratic political systems (Almond & Verba, 1963/1989; Bianco, 1994) and human universals (Hatemi & McDermott, 2011; Petersen, 2015).

General Attitudes Towards Politics

Researchers of public opinion and political behavior have conceptualized a variety of attitudinal constructs, all concerned with the way people think or feel about politics. For the purpose of this article, we call these concepts general attitudes towards politics. We use the term attitudes in a broad sense, as mental judgments of an object on any relevant dimension (McGuire, 1989), which can include cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions. These attitudes aim towards politics, in the sense that they do not refer to policy issues or issue-related ideologies, but to the “world” of politics in general, that is, political structures, processes, and actors, including one’s own role in these processes. We focus on generalized attitudes, in the sense of broad attitudes towards categorical rather than specific structures, processes, and actors, and we think of these constructs as traits, which are by definition relatively stable over time (Steyer & Schmitt, 1990, p. 427). A number of constructs fitting our definition is presented in Table 1, separated by two categories that we will describe in more detail later.

In our view, the literature on these constructs suffers from several conceptual and psychometric problems. Many of the constructs are difficult to distinguish conceptually (e.g., political trust versus political support; Citrin & Muste, 1999, p. 466; political involvement versus political interest versus political engagement; Martín & van Deth, 2007, p. 303) and the same phenomena have been studied under different names (e.g., subjective political competence, Weatherford, 1991; perceived political self-efficacy, Caprara, Vecchione, Capanna, & Mebane, 2009; and internal political efficacy, Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991). Furthermore, the same indicators serve as measures for different constructs. For example, the political efficacy items by Campbell et al. (1954) have served as measures of subjective political competence (Weatherford, 1991), involvement (Schatz, Staub, & Lavine, 1999), alienation (Mason & Jaros, 1969), or disaffection (Gunther & Montero, 2006).

In addition to these conceptual ambiguities, we see two shortcomings that warrant theoretical integration. First, there is a lack of integrative work on the dimensional structure of these constructs. A number of studies applied factor analyses in the attempt to separate subdimensions: There is empirical research on the subdimensions of political trust (Craig, Niemi, & Silver, 1990), political efficacy (Balch, 1974), and political alienation (Finifter, 1970), to name just a few examples. But these analyses focus on single constructs, while we observe an almost complete lack of structural analyses that integrate the broad range of constructs (for an exception, see Weatherford, 1991). We argue that the conceptual ambiguities and the lack of integrative structural models hinders an effective scientific exchange, for example by obscuring how findings on one construct might or might not generalize to related constructs.

Second, dimensional analyses of attitudes towards politics lack a cross-cultural perspective. Comparative research has often addressed mean levels and distributions, based on the logic that citizens are socialized by the political culture or system they live in (e.g., Almond & Verba, 1963/1989; Mishler & Rose, 1997). In contrast, attempts to compare the dimensional structure across cultures are scarce, and—again—mostly limited to the dimensionality of single constructs (e.g., trust in institutions: Mishler & Rose, 1997; political efficacy: Hayes & Bean, 1993; political support: Gunther & Montero, 2006). In the context of trust in institutions, Mishler and Rose (1997) argued that fundamental regime differences (totalitarian communism vs. liberal democracy) may lead to different dimensional structures (with communist institutions being controlled by a strong state leadership,
but democratic institutions working more independently). Meanwhile, whether different democracies can produce such differences, or whether the same overall structure of attitudes towards politics applies in different democratic countries, has not been investigated so far. We argue that this question sheds light on the degree of universality of political attitudes. Similar to what has been argued for the structure of personality traits (McCrae & Costa, 1997) and the use of heuristics in politics (Petersen, 2015, p. 61), structural noninvariance (i.e., different patterns of attitude covariation in different countries) would indicate a strong role of the environment in organizing attitudes towards politics, while structural invariance (i.e., similar patterns across countries) would point towards a more universal mechanism that affects humans independently of cultural background. Either way, a universal structure of attitudes towards politics would indicate that socialization is not the driving force in structuring political attitudes (cf. Petersen, 2015, p. 61), although it undoubtedly affects individuals’ attitude levels (e.g., Eckstein, Noack, & Gniewosz, 2012; Mishler & Rose, 1997).

### Table 1. Overview of General Attitudes Towards Politics

| Construct                                      | Reference                                  |
|------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| **Constructs of political involvement**        |                                            |
| Political involvement                         | Martín and van Deth (2007)                |
| Internal political efficacy                   | Niemi et al. (1991)                       |
| Subjective political competence               | Weatherford (1991)                       |
| Perceived political self-efficacy             | Caprara et al. (2009)                     |
| Political interest                            | van Deth (1990)                           |
| Political awareness                           | Zaller (1992)                             |
| Political attentiveness                        | Geissel (2008)                            |
| Political sociability                          | Foschi and Lauriola (2014)                |
| Political participation                        | Verba and Nie (1972)                      |
| Political engagement                          | Levy and Akiva (2019)                     |
| Sense of citizen duty                          | Campbell et al. (1954)                    |
| Political protest propensity                   | Brandstätter and Opp (2014)               |
| Protest potential                              | Marsh and Kaase (1979)                    |
| Political apathy                               | DeLuca (1995)                             |
| Political disaffection<sup>a</sup>             | Torcal and Montero (2006)                 |
| Political alienation<sup>a</sup>               | Finifter (1970)                           |
| Political disenchantment<sup>a</sup>           | Stoker (2010)                             |
| **Constructs of political trust**              |                                            |
| Political trust                                | Newton (2007)                             |
| Trust in politicians                           | Halmburger et al. (2019)                  |
| Trust in government                            | Citrin and Muste (1999)                   |
| Confidence in institutions                     | Newton (2007)                             |
| External political efficacy                    | Balch (1974)                              |
| Trust in the political system                  | Halmburger et al. (2019)                  |
| Regime-based trust                              | Craig et al. (1990)                       |
| Perceived procedural justice                   | Tyler (1990)                              |
| Political support                              | Easton (1975)                             |
| Political legitimacy                           | Weatherford (1991)                        |
| Political cynicism                             | Cappella and Jamieson (1997)              |
| Perceived political normlessness               | Finifter (1970)                           |
| Political discontent                            | Gunther and Montero (2006)                |
| Political disaffection<sup>a</sup>             | Torcal and Montero (2006)                 |
| Political alienation<sup>a</sup>               | Finifter (1970)                           |
| Political disenchantment<sup>a</sup>           | Stoker (2010)                             |

<sup>a</sup> These constructs combine components of both categories.
Summarizing, we see three problems regarding the research on general attitudes towards politics: redundancy in constructs due to conceptual overlap; the unclear overall dimensional structure; and a lack of knowledge about structural invariance across countries, which relates to the broader question of human nature versus socialization in structuring political attitudes. Our aim is to tackle these issues by proposing and testing a higher-order factor model for general attitudes towards politics and testing this model across a broad range of democracies.

**General Trust and Involvement as Higher-Order Factors**

Several authors have suggested that political concepts related to the self can be distinguished from concepts related to the political environment (see Denk, Christensen, & Bergh, 2015; Finifter, 1970; Gamson, 1968, p. 42; Torcal & Montero, 2006; Vetter, 1997a; Weatherford, 1991). Building on this distinction, we propose that general attitudes towards politics can be structured by two higher-order factors, the first one—general political involvement—subsuming self-related attitudes, and the second one—general political trust—subsuming beliefs about the political system and its actors.

In a higher-order factor model, shared variance between different traits (the lower-order or first-order factors) is explained by a conceptually broader latent variable (the higher-order or second-order factor). From a statistical perspective, higher-order factors are plausible when two or more traits share a substantial amount of interindividual variance (cf. Carroll, 1993). Whenever this shared variance can be interpreted in a meaningful way, higher-order factors offer a parsimonious way of describing complex trait structures.

We argue that a higher-order model of general attitudes towards politics can help with the conceptual problems described earlier: First, the conceptual overlap can be interpreted in a meaningful way (as general tendencies in how people relate to politics), clarifying much of the conceptual ambiguity described above. Second, by integrating the fine-grained conceptual differences into a higher-order dimensional model, future research will be able to differentiate the level of aggregation in order to select the adequate level for each specific theoretical question (e.g., lower-order factors to predict specific behavior, higher-order factors to predict general behavior; cf. Wittmann, 1988). We will now elaborate the conceptual assumptions of the two dimensions in more detail.

**General Political Involvement**

Different authors have suggested that people can be more or less psychologically involved in politics (e.g., Verba & Nie, 1972, p. 83) but have reduced the meaning of psychological involvement to political interest and attentiveness (enduring interests and selective attention being the psychological entities that are “involved in politics”). However, there are a number of other important psychological systems related to a person’s self-perception—like identity, motivations, and perceived self-efficacy—for each of which the political domain can be more or less important for any given individual. These different components of the self are highly intertwined, both logically and functionally. An increased importance of politics in one component is thus likely to spill over to the other components (e.g., if politics is a central aspect of a person’s identity, his or her motivations and interests should consequently include political motives and an interest for politics). This implies a more widespread, general tendency of psychological involvement in politics, which we define as the degree that politics is relevant for various aspects of a person’s self-concept.

Many of the concepts from the upper part of Table 1 essentially describe the relevance of politics within different self-related psychological systems. For instance, internal political efficacy (a person’s self-belief to be capable of understanding and participating in the political process; Niemi et al., 1991, p. 1407) expresses the relevance of politics within a person’s hierarchy of self-efficacy beliefs (cf. Bandura, 1997; Caprara et al., 2009). Political interest (the degree that politics can arouse...
an individual’s curiosity; van Deth, 1990, p. 278) expresses the relevance of the political domain within a person’s enduring interests. Political participation propensity—defined as a person’s general willingness to engage in political participation behavior\(^1\)—reflects whether politics is relevant within the motivational system. Other self-related concepts from Table 1 might also fit this reasoning (e.g., political attentiveness, which might be understood as a person’s attention system being sensitive for political information). For practical reasons, however, we focus on the three concepts outlined above.

Multiple causal effects have been proposed to link these concepts. For example, internal efficacy can be assumed to facilitate intentions to participate in politics, as people do not have much reason to pursue activities they expect to fail (Ajzen, 1991; Bandura, 1997; Caprara et al., 2009). Meanwhile, the resulting participation behavior and its perceived results are likely to feed back into beliefs of internal efficacy (Finkel, 1987; Quintelier & van Deth, 2014), political interest (Quintelier & van Deth, 2014), and possibly participation propensity (cf. Ajzen, 2011, p. 1121). In addition, all three concepts might be jointly affected by third variables like—for example—political knowledge (Foschi & Lauriola, 2014) and—as we will discuss later—genetic factors (e.g., Klemmensen, Hatemi, Hobolt, Petersen, et al., 2012).

Whatever the exact processes that link these variables, their strong intercorrelations have been confirmed many times (e.g., Foschi & Lauriola, 2014, p. 350; Levy & Akiva, 2019; Niemi et al., 1991; Webb, 2013) and indicate that these variables can be organized under a common higher-order factor. As these constructs all reflect the importance of politics for different systems of the self, this higher-order factor can be understood as the overall degree of political relevance for the self. The fact that this factor is descriptive in nature, and not explanatory, does not make it less useful (e.g., to parsimoniously map individual citizens in the political attitude space, or as predictor for broadly aggregated criteria; cf. Wittmann, 1988), nor does it deny that complex processes connect the specific components to each other.

General political involvement is thus conceptualized broadly (in line with several previous studies which use a superordinate involvement term, subsuming political interest, internal efficacy, and related concepts: e.g., Schatz et al., 1999; Vetter, 1997a; Weatherford, 1991), and as a psychological variable (different from participation in a purely behavioral sense; cf. Martín & van Deth, 2007), and reflects the use of the attitudinal involvement term in psychological research (e.g., Johnson & Eagly, 1989: “[I]nvolvement is the motivational state induced by an association between an activated attitude and some aspect of the self-concept,” p. 293).

**General Political Trust**

The second hypothesized dimension of attitudes towards politics is general trust in politics (i.e., in the political system, its institutions, and actors). We define general political trust as the expectation that political objects are—in general—trustworthy, in the sense that they will behave in the citizens’ best interest, even in the absence of direct citizen control (cf. Gamson, 1968; Halmburger, Baumert, & Rothmund, 2019; Newton, 2007). Psychologically, expectations of trustworthiness are relevant in relationships of vulnerability (where one party leaves control to another party, thus taking a personal risk; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). Generalized trust in particular becomes relevant in situations of ambiguity (where the trusting party does not have much information on the specific

\(^1\)Accordingly, participation propensity is a mental, and not a behavioral, concept. This focus on a behavioral propensity as an enduring disposition (rather than actual behavior) is especially common in research on political protest (e.g., Brandstätter & Opp, 2014; Marsh & Kaase, 1979; Webb, 2013), but it can be extended to political participation in general (Ajzen, 1991, pp. 186–188; Eckstein et al., 2012). We emphasize this conceptual distinction because only motives/intentions—but not the actual behavior—can be components of a person’s internalized self-view (irrespective of their strong empirical links; cf. Ajzen, 1991).
trustee, thus resorting to generalized beliefs about people or certain types of people; Rotter, 1971). We argue that vulnerability and ambiguity characterize the default in a democracy, where citizens leave control to representatives and institutions, remaining in a position of vulnerability, but lack the full information to judge the representatives’ or institutions’ trustworthiness (Bianco, 1994, Chap. 2), thus relying on generalized beliefs of political trust (for a similar argument, see Hooghe, 2011; for empirical evidence, see Marien & Hooghe, 2011; Mishler & Rose, 1997).

In many situations, however, people might be expected to further differentiate—regarding (1) the specific political object and (2) the dimension of judgment—resulting in more specific factors of political trust. Regarding different objects, we focus on trust in politicians (i.e., the expectation that politicians are generally trustworthy; Halmburger et al., 2019), trust in political institutions (e.g., Marien & Hooghe, 2011), and trust in the political system (i.e., the expectation of the system’s fairness, responsiveness, and efficiency; Halmburger et al., 2019). Regarding the dimension of judgment, Mayer et al. (1995) proposed a widely acknowledged psychological model of trust, which presumes three factors of how people judge trustworthiness: ability, benevolence, and integrity. Applied to the political context, perceptions of politicians’ competence, benevolence, and integrity converge into overall trust in politicians (Halmburger et al., 2019). Analogously, perceptions of the political system’s effectiveness (= competence), responsiveness (= benevolence), and fairness (= integrity) converge into overall system trust (Halmburger et al., 2019; see also Craig et al., 1990, p. 301; Grimes, 2017, p. 259). These later factors of system trust play themselves a great role in the political attitude literature: For example, the system’s perceived responsiveness is synonymous with the concept of external political efficacy (e.g., Balch, 1974, p. 24; Niemi et al., 1991, p. 1408), and its perceived fairness is often studied in terms of perceived procedural justice or fairness (e.g., Grimes, 2017; Tyler, 1990). Concluding, we propose that (1) specific beliefs of political trust (e.g., trust in politicians) and (2) concepts emphasizing different aspects of trustworthiness (e.g., external efficacy) can all be subsumed under a common dimension of general political trust (see Figure 1).

As noted before, there are some conceptual similarities between political trust and political support (Citrin & Muste, 1999, p. 466). Accordingly, the proposed hierarchical structure of political trust might—at first glance—resemble the different levels of political support, as suggested by Dalton (1999). However, the idea of generalization is used differently. Diffuse support (as conceptualized by Dalton, 1999; Easton, 1975) is more general than specific support in the sense that its objects are broader and more abstract (e.g., the system’s basic principles vs. specific authorities). In contrast, general trust generalizes across various kinds of political objects, both abstract (e.g., the system) and concrete (e.g., politicians). In other words, higher-order trust is general in referring to abstract and specific objects, while diffuse support is specific in only referring to abstract objects. Both hierarchical models thus follow a different internal logic. In addition to this conceptual difference, we prefer the terminology of trust over support, because trust can be defined psychologically (as a generalized expectation), enabling us to build our model assumptions on psychological insight (about the nature of such generalized expectations; e.g., Halmburger et al., 2019; Rotter, 1971).

Previous findings support the idea of a higher-order factor of political trust: To some degree, people seem to differentiate between trust in (1) politicians, (2) institutions, and (3) the political system (Craig et al., 1990; Halmburger et al., 2019; Schiffman, Thelen, & Sherman, 2010). However, the resulting factors of trust are positively correlated and sometimes even difficult to distinguish empirically (Hooghe, 2011; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). In addition, both, external efficacy (or perceived system responsiveness) and procedural justice beliefs (or perceived system fairness) have consistently been shown to correlate with various forms of political trust (e.g., Craig et al., 1990, p. 304; Grimes, 2017; Niemi et al., 1991, p. 1411; Tyler, Rasinski, & McGraw, 1985; Vetter, 1997b) and can therefore be expected to load on the hypothesized higher-order factor, too.
Based on what we argued so far, general political involvement and general political trust can be understood as distinct concepts. Several points, however, have guided our decision, to treat both broad tendencies as part of the same structural model, under a joint umbrella term (“general attitudes towards politics”). First, both dimensions characterize people’s basic orientations towards politics. Second, each dimension corresponds to a different idealized citizen prototype (cf. Vetter, 1997a),
with involvement subsuming traits related to citizens’ participation in the political process (e.g., Martín & van Deth, 2007, p. 303), and citizens’ trust as a prerequisite for institutions and politicians to work properly (e.g., Bianco, 1994, p. 23). Third, the combination of both dimensions is useful for the creation of comprehensive citizen typologies (see, e.g., Denk et al., 2015; Finifter, 1970). Fourth, several influential concepts in the literature are defined as versions of a “low-involvement-low-trust syndrome” (e.g., political alienation, disaffection, and disenchantment). For example, political disaffection has been defined as a combination of “the subjective feeling of powerlessness” combined with a “lack of confidence in the political process, politicians, and democratic institutions” (Torcal & Montero, 2006, p. 6; emphasis in original). Finally, studies on similar dimensions (but not applying the higher-order logic) found moderate positive correlations (e.g., Finifter, 1970: \( r = .26 \)), indicating some dependency between both tendencies.

The Present Research

In our studies, we first assess the adequacy of the proposed higher-order factor model using an online quota sample (Study 1) and 26 country subsamples from the 2014 International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) dataset (Study 2). We then assess whether the higher-order model has the same structure across all 26 democracies (Study 2). Complementary analyses based on World Value Survey (WVS) data aim to replicate the findings and are reported in the online supporting information.

Note that the theoretical model is not limited to the concepts described above, but potentially includes all concepts from Table 1. Since we cannot test the full set of lower-order constructs, we validate the model based on subsets of potential lower-order constructs. The selection was guided practically (by availability of data), and the different empirical models across studies include slightly different subsets of the theoretical model’s potential lower-order constructs.\(^2\)

STUDY 1

In Study 1, we assessed the higher-order model in comparison to a less restrictive model (“measurement model,” see Figure 2).

Sample

We surveyed an online sample representative of the German adult population regarding gender, age, and education. Data was collected in December 2017 by a professional survey agency (www.respondi.com). After listwise exclusion of missing values (28 cases excluded), the sample consisted of \( N = 767 \) (49.8% female; mean age of 44.9 years; 31%, 33%, and 36% with low, medium, and high levels of education, respectively). Respondents were remunerated financially.

Measures

For each higher-order factor, we included three lower-order constructs:

**Internal Political Efficacy**

We used four items from the *Perceived Political Self-Efficacy* scale by Caprara et al. (2009), achieving an internal consistency of McDonald’s omega for ordinal scales (\( \omega \)) = .87.

\(^2\)Replication materials for all studies can be accessed at https://osf.io/yc4vx/?view_only=a000f71947564c559b45122f31c17f90.
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Political Interest

We selected three items ($\omega = .97$) from Otto and Bacherle’s (2011) Political Interest Short Scale.

Political Participation Propensity

We asked about the frequency of four different political activities during the past two years as proxy of political participation propensity ($\omega = .86$).

Trust in Politicians

We selected three items ($\omega = .90$) from the Dispositional Trust in Politicians scale by Halmburger et al. (2019).

Trust in Political Institutions

We asked about respondents’ trust in three political institutions (parliament, government, and political parties; $\omega = .92$), based on the wording from GESIS (2015).
External Political Efficacy

External efficacy was measured using three items ($\omega = .80$) proposed by Vetter (1997b).

Five-point Likert scales were used for all items, except the participation items, which were based on the typical 4-point frequency assessment (e.g., GESIS, 2015). Item wordings and descriptives are reported in the online supporting information.

Results

Using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) based on structural equation modeling, we specified two models (see Figure 2). The measurement model consists of all six constructs, without correlational restrictions, and serves as the baseline model. In contrast, the higher-order model inhibits all correlations except between higher-order factors. It is more parsimonious and nested in the measurement model (cf. Kline, 2016, p. 280).

For the measurement model, we judged absolute model fit by jointly assessing CFI ($\geq .95$) and SRMR ($\leq .08$; Hu & Bentler, 1999). As the higher-order model is nested in the measurement model, the decrease in fit indices (in our case $\Delta$CFI) indicates comparative fit. For a lack of simulation studies from other contexts, we applied the $\Delta$CFI $\leq .01$ criterion proposed by Cheung and Rensvold (2002) in the context of invariance testing. Due to the ordinal scale level and nonnormal distributions in the participation propensity items, we used diagonally weighted least squares estimation (Kline, 2016, pp. 257–258). All analyses were conducted in R (version 4.0.2, R Core Team, 2018), using the lavaan package (version 0.6-7, Rosseel, 2012).

As reported in Table 2, the measurement model fitted the data well (CFI = .998 and SRMR = .054), and the higher-order model did not substantially decrease model fit ($\Delta$CFI = .002), confirming the adequacy of the higher-order factors. The higher-order factors explained large amounts of lower-order factor variance (on average 46% for involvement and 85% for trust). The correlation between the latent factors was significant and positive ($\hat{\rho} = .45$; $p < .001$).

Discussion

Our analyses confirmed that the inclusion of two higher-order factors results in a well-fitting and parsimonious structural model of attitudes towards politics. The higher-order factors explain large amounts of lower-order factor variance and can be meaningfully interpreted as general political involvement (expressing the importance of politics to self-related psychological systems, like self-efficacy beliefs, enduring interests, and motivations) and general political trust (the generalized expectation of trustworthiness, subsuming various objects and dimensions of trustworthiness). The implied hierarchical structure is in line with previous findings. For example, citizens have been shown to judge political trust holistically (e.g., Hooghe, 2011; Mutz & Reeves, 2005) and only differentiate at a lower level (e.g., Mishler & Rose, 1997).
In line with previous research, both factors were positively correlated. For instance, Finifter (1970) found a positive correlation between two dimensions of political alienation, which she labeled political powerlessness (equivalent to low involvement) and political normlessness (equivalent to low trust) (see also Weatherford, 1991).

Bianco (1994, Chap. 2) theorized that citizens can choose between involvement and trust as strategies towards their representatives: They can monitor whether a representative acts on their demands (and make him or her accountable at the next election), or they can trust the representative to act in the citizens’ best interest (and give him or her the leeway for efficient policymaking). We argue that these strategies are not mutually exclusive, but complementary, allowing for four prototypical combinations of high and low levels of general involvement and trust (see Denk et al., 2015, for a discussion of such prototypes). Since a mix of involvement and trust has been argued to be most beneficial for a democracy (Almond & Verba, 1963/1989; Denk et al., 2015), the positive correlation between both tendencies might reflect the natural response to democratic demands.

STUDY 2

In Study 2, we aimed to replicate the findings from Study 1 in different democracies and to compare the higher-order structure across countries as a human universal.

Sample

We based the analyses on the 2014 ISSP dataset, which contains nationally representative samples from 29 democracies across six continents (ISSP Research Group, 2016).

As our substantial analyses required a reliable and accurate measurement of all constructs (i.e., the measurement model needed to fit the data well), we excluded three countries (France, India, and Japan) with misfitting measurement models (CFI < .95 or SRMR > .08). After listwise exclusion of missing values, the total sample consisted of $N = 29,018$ cases from 26 democracies (see the online supporting information for details).

Measures

The ISSP dataset contains measures of five constructs fitting our definition of general attitudes towards politics (see the online supporting information for details).

**Internal Political Efficacy**

We measured internal efficacy by two 5-point Likert scale items from the scale by Niemi et al. (1991; Spearman Brown coefficient = .47).

**Political Interest**

Similar to van Deth (1990), we used a 4-point political interest self-rating, a 7-point item on the frequency of political media usage, and a 4-point item on the frequency of discussing politics to measure political interest ($\omega = .76$).

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3In addition, the ISSP 2014 included five nondemocratic regimes (Georgia, Russia, Turkey, Philippines, Venezuela; cf. Freedom House, 2015).
**Political Participation Propensity**

To measure participation propensity, we used 4-point Likert scale items of past and future willingness to participate in five different political activities ($\omega = .84$).

**Trust in Politicians**

Trust in politicians was measured with two items, using 5-point agreement scales (Spearman Brown coefficient = .54).

**External Political Efficacy**

We used three items to measure external efficacy: two 5-point Likert scale items from Campbell et al. (1954) and one 4-point Likert scale item about the likelihood of the legislature giving attention to collective action against a hypothetical unjust law ($\omega = .75$).

**Results**

As a prerequisite for country comparisons, we first tested invariance of the measurement model (Figure 3) to ensure that survey language and cultural background did not confound the measurement (cf. Cheung & Rensvold, 2002) and established configural ($\text{CFI} = .977$; $\text{SRMR} = .056$) and metric ($\Delta \text{CFI} = .008$) invariance, allowing us to proceed with the substantial analyses (Steenkamp & Baumgartner, 1998; see the online supporting information for details).

**Relative Fit of the Higher-Order Model**

We assessed the higher-order model compared to the measurement model, following the same procedure as in Study 1, but within each country separately. As before, we used diagonally weighted least squares estimation, due to ordinal scale level and nonnormal item distributions (Kline, 2016, pp. 257–258). The low number of indicators per factor occasionally resulted in negative estimates for latent variances (cf. Ding, Velicer, & Harlow, 1995). As this was most frequently the case with external efficacy, we decided to constrain this construct’s latent variance to a value of 0, thereby enabling convergence in three country samples, in which convergence would otherwise not have been achieved. Figure 4 displays the CFI values of each country’s measurement model (full bar), higher-order model (light grey bar), and their difference (dark gray bar; black for models above the cutoff of $\Delta \text{CFI} > .01$). All fit indices are reported in the online supporting information.

Judging by $\Delta \text{CFI}$, the inclusion of higher-order factors did not substantially decrease model fit in most countries (24 out of 26). While several countries came close to the cutoff (Iceland, Israel, Belgium, United States, and Denmark: $\Delta \text{CFI} = .009$), only Slovenia ($\Delta \text{CFI} = .012$) and Croatia ($\Delta \text{CFI} = .13$) exceeded it. An inspection of parameter estimates and modification indices revealed that part of these countries’ misspecification stemmed from a cross-loading between the third external efficacy item (legislature giving attention to action against an unjust law) and the latent participation propensity—including this cross-loading substantially increased model fit for both countries (Croatia: $\Delta \text{CFI}' = .005$; Slovenia: $\Delta \text{CFI}' = .002$).

An additional full-sample analysis ($N = 29,018$) yielded good model fit ($\Delta \text{CFI} = .002$), confirming the overall pattern of results.

Again, the correlation between higher-order factors was positive in all subsamples and mostly moderate in size ($M = .35$; $SD = .11$; see Figure 5), confirming the previous results.
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Cross-Country Invariance of the Higher-Order Model

Complementary to the within-country analyses, we tested the higher-order model’s invariance across countries using multigroup CFA (MGCFA). Specifically, we tested for configural invariance, which specifies the same factor structure across groups but allows for group-specific parameter estimates (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002). Again, we constrained the external efficacy’s variance estimate to zero in order to facilitate model convergence.

As hypothesized, the invariance model of the higher-order structure fitted the data well (CFI = .972; SRMR = .061; see the online supporting information). We deduce that the higher-order factors of general involvement and trust describe the items’ covariance structure similarly well across all 26 countries.

Discussion

Our results include several pieces of evidence for the cross-country generalizability of the model. First, the MGCFA confirmed the model’s factorial pattern to be invariant across all 26 countries. Second, the fact of the higher-order factors being positively correlated in each country confirmed the similarity of the structure across countries (cf. Petersen, 2015, p. 61). Third—for a majority of 24 countries—the higher-order model fitted the data well, compared to a measurement model with no higher-order factors. We cannot rule out the possibility that the exceptional cases of Croatia and
Figure 4. Model fit by sample.

Figure 5. Country-wise estimates of the correlation between higher-order latent factors. Error bars indicate 90% CIs.
Slovenia differ for some systemic reason. However, no clear macro pattern separated these two from the remaining cases, which would offer an explanation (other than being former Yugoslavian countries). Rather, we attribute this finding to a different understanding of the third external efficacy item, as indicated by the fact that a single additional cross-loading of this item substantially increased model fit.

Overall, we conclude that the higher-order trait structure occurs largely country independent. Since the countries differ substantially regarding size, culture, economic performance, and type of democracy (see the online supporting information), we interpret the invariant structure as expression of a human universal, which might be rooted in the human genome (Hatemi & McDermott, 2011) or in universally shared human experiences (McCrae & Costa, 1997, p. 509). The possibility of a genetically transmitted trait structure is in line with twin studies showing that all of the lower-order constructs have substantial heritable components (e.g., Dawes et al., 2014). Furthermore, studies by Klemmensen, Hatemi, Hobolt, Skytte, et al. (2012) and Klemmensen, Hatemi, Hobolt, Petersen, et al. (2012) revealed that part of the covariation between political interest, efficacy, and participation goes back to shared genetic factors, pointing towards a heritable higher-order factor. Although we are not aware of findings of genetic covariation between the concepts of political trust, trust and mistrust are closely associated to evolutionary human challenges, like collaboration and the prevention of being exploited by others (Hatemi & McDermott, 2011, pp. 14–15) and the selection of trustworthy leaders (Smith, Larimer, Littvay, & Hibbing, 2007), which makes human universality seem like a not too far-fetched conclusion.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

In the present article, we proposed a two-factor higher-order model for general attitudes towards politics. Conducting CFAs on several samples, we presented evidence for its validity: We assessed a six-construct version of the proposed model in a German online sample (Study 1) and a five-construct version in representative samples of 26 democracies from across the world (Study 2). In all but two countries, the model fitted the data well when compared against a baseline model. Furthermore, configural invariance was established across all 26 countries. We replicated the results on a different set of country samples from the WVS—including many non-WEIRD countries (see the online supporting information).

Democratic Demands and Human Nature

An attitude-structure that is invariant across diverse cultures can be assumed universal (i.e., applying to all humans; McCrae & Costa, 1997) and might be explained by (1) universally shared experiences and/or (2) the biologically encoded evolutionary heritage of the human species (Petersen, 2015). We are going to briefly consider both explanations for the case of general attitudes towards politics.

All our participants share the experience of democratic citizenship (while other features, like culture or wealth, differ between countries). Two theoretical perspectives on democratic citizenship can be distinguished (Vetter, 1997a, pp. 19–20): The participatory perspective suggests that citizens need to articulate their demands and attentively monitor their representatives’ actions (Geissel, 2008; Martín & van Deth, 2007, p. 303). The representational perspective, on the other hand, suggests that citizens should increase their elected representatives’ leeway by trusting them to use their best judgment, enabling them to make long-term beneficial policy decisions (Bianco, 1994, p. 23; Citrin & Muste, 1999, pp. 465–466; Mishler & Rose, 1997, p. 419). Our conceptualization of general involvement and trust corresponds roughly to these citizen ideals and might thus be understood as response to the general demands a democracy holds for its citizens. As argued before, the positive correlation
between both factors corroborates this reasoning because both citizen strategies (the participatory and the trusting strategy; cf. Bianco, 1994) might be most beneficial when combined, resulting in the civic culture prototype described by Almond and Verba (1963/1989).

The second possible explanation focuses on human nature. Inspired by anthropology and evolutionary psychology, political scientists have recently started investigating the evolutionary roots of political attitudes (e.g., Hatemi & McDermott, 2011; Petersen, 2015). Many adaptive challenges of our prehistoric ancestors’ hunter-gatherer societies resembled today’s political problems (e.g., cooperation, distribution of resources, selection of leaders; see Petersen, 2015; Smith et al., 2007), potentially channeling the evolution of adaptive “political” traits in the human species. For instance, Smith et al. (2007) argued, that a group was more likely to be evolutionary successful, if they managed (1) to trust and follow competent leaders, but (2) also remain attentive to exploitation by these leaders. These roles were most successful if divided between individuals (Smith et al., 2007, pp. 286-287), facilitating the evolution of differences in dispositional “trust in leaders”. Furthermore, individuals might have developed different degrees of engagement in “political” problems (like the selection of leaders and distribution of resources) as part of the evolutionary beneficial division of labor and expertise. In the words of Smith et al.: “Monitoring leaders is a time-consuming task …; thus it may be best [left] to a subset of the population … while others in the group go about their business unburdened with such concerns” (p. 286). These conjectures provide a conceivable basis for explaining structural universality, which is further corroborated by the twin-study findings revealing genetic covariation between different attitudes of political involvement (e.g., Klemmensen, Hatemi, Hobolt, Skytte, et al., 2012).

Meanwhile, Hatemi and McDermott (2011) argue that “universal human characteristics may have different expressions in different societies dependent upon … environmental cues” (p. 29). In that sense, we assume the specific demands of a democratic society (see above) to be the boundary conditions for the expression of a universal trait structure.

**Theoretical Implications**

As argued in the theory part of this article, many concepts have been used inconsistently regarding their conceptualization, measures, and dimensional assumptions, potentially threatening the robustness of results. Because higher-order factors represent the shared variance between related constructs, they are less susceptible to these problems and offer an opportunity to produce more robust results in the future. Since these higher-order factors are valid across democracies, this might especially apply for comparative research.

We can imagine a number of applications where the higher-order factors might offer an advantage over the lower-order constructs: First, higher-order factors are generally better suited for the prediction of broad or highly aggregated criteria (Wittmann, 1988), as might be the case when predicting general participation behavior, as opposed to specific forms of participation. Second, broad personality traits (e.g., the Big Five) have recently gained attention as predictors of attitudes towards politics (e.g., Brandstätter & Opp, 2014). As these personality traits are themselves broad aggregations of specific behaviors, higher-order factors of attitudes towards politics offer a more adequate match (Wittmann, 1988). Third, higher-order political involvement and trust might be useful control variables, avoiding the inclusion of redundant variables into a statistical model (similar to the common practice of including left–right orientation instead of specific issue preferences). Fourth, some authors have used general attitudes towards politics to create citizen typologies (e.g., Denk et al., 2015; Finifter, 1970). A comprehensible typology can only include a limited number of dimensions, and we argue that higher-order factors reduce the number of relevant dimensions most adequately.

In order to apply higher-order political involvement and trust in these various contexts, we suggest developing specific indicators that measure the core of the higher-order factors.
Limitations

The selection of indicators was limited in two ways: First, our empirical models included only subsets of the range of potential constructs. A broader representation of constructs (e.g., the inclusion of trust in the system) would have strengthened our arguments. However, the different subsets of constructs across studies (see also the online supporting information) yielded highly consistent results, indicating generalizability to other related lower-order constructs. Second, some constructs in Study 2 were specified using only two items, which is not optimal regarding reliability and model-convergence properties (Ding et al., 1995). This problem came as a trade-off with the great number of countries included in the ISSP dataset, which we believe outweigh the limitation, especially since there is no other multinational survey with a similar breadth of attitudes towards politics.

Furthermore, some country subsamples in Study 2 have large numbers of missing values, potentially biasing the results in these countries. To rule out a systematic bias, we correlated the degree of data loss with several relevant outcome parameters per country (e.g., model fit criteria), which were all uncorrelated, indicating that listwise exclusion of missing values did not undermine the robustness of results (see the online supporting information). In addition, Study 1 yielded similar results with nearly no missings (3.5%).

One minor limitation concerns the higher-order correlations. Since our measurement model achieved only metric invariance, but not scalar invariance (see the online supporting information), the exact correlation estimates cannot be compared across countries. Although negligible for our study—because a reliable comparison of correlational patterns only requires metric invariance—there might be severe implications for other comparative studies using these items (Steenkamp & Baumgartner, 1998).

Conclusion

General attitudes towards politics can be structured by two correlated higher-order factors, which represent people’s global tendencies of personal relatedness to politics (general political involvement) and their perceived trustworthiness of political objects (general political trust). This structure can be widely replicated across democratic countries. We argue that this indicates the universality of individual differences in how people think and feel about politics within democracies.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Laurits Bromme, University of Koblenz-Landau, Fortstraße 7, 76829 Landau, Germany. E-mail: bromme@uni-landau.de

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Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher’s web site:

Supplementary Material