

**INFORMATION DISCLOSURE AND POLITICAL TRUST DURING THE COVID-  
19 CRISIS: EXPERIMENTAL EVIDENCE FROM IRELAND**

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**Abstract:**

*The implementation of unprecedented crisis management policies in response to the spread of Covid-19 has attracted the attention of scholars interested in exploring the link between pandemic politics and political trust. However, while the disclosure of information about the pandemic constitutes an important aspect of crisis management policies, the effect of the level of information disclosure on political trust has not yet been investigated. As part of a larger nationally-representative survey experiment on the role of transparency on political trust, we collected data from 618 respondents in the Republic of Ireland in May 2020. The pre-registered study manipulated the level of the disclosure of government information about the status of the pandemic (high and low information conditions). We do not find any direct effects of information disclosure treatments on political trust. However, we find that the high information condition significantly increases political trust among individuals with higher levels of prior trust in government, while it leads to a backfiring effect among those with lower levels of prior trust. These findings are relevant for both public opinion and public policy researchers who are interested in the effect of openness on citizen attitudes.*

**Keywords:** Political trust; transparency; Covid-19; survey experiment

## INTRODUCTION

The implementation of unprecedented crisis management policies in response to the spread of Covid-19 has attracted the attention of political scientists interested in the link between pandemic politics and political trust. In a recent review, Devine et al. (2020) identify a growing body of literature that investigates the effect of the adoption of lockdown policies (Bol et al., 2020; Esaiasson et al., 2020) or the health outcomes associated with crisis management policies (Amat et al., 2020; Schraff, 2020) on political trust. Yet, while government communication of the status of the crisis also constitutes an important part of the crisis management strategy, existing research has not investigated the effect of information disclosure about the pandemic on political trust.

Government action during the Covid-19 crisis has been more than just the implementation of policies to ‘flatten the curve’. The daily press briefings and question time between task forces and media, and the daily release of information about contagion rates, the number of deaths and tests have been an important part of governments’ crisis response. This information has been used by experts, journalists and citizens as a benchmark to compare ‘how well their country is doing’ vis a vis the others. Decisions to ‘not disclose’ detailed information have been heavily criticized and have led to a decline in public support (Jennings, 2020). In Brazil, Bolsonaro’s decision to stop releasing the cumulative number of Covid-19 cases and deaths from the official government web site has been heavily contested. In the UK, the government decision to delay the release of detailed pandemic data was viewed as ‘a major problem’ and has been associated with decreased trust in government.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, information disclosure restrictions in Turkey were associated with a 26-point drop in citizen confidence in the accuracy of information released by the government.<sup>2</sup>

These examples suggest that a link between information disclosure about the pandemic and political trust may exist. The effect of information disclosure on political trust is extensively explored in other contexts (Grimmeilkhuijsen, 2012; Worhty, 2010, Welch et al.,

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<sup>1</sup> UK rejects calls to publish detailed data of care-home deaths from COVID-19, *Reuters*, May 13, 2020. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-britain-carehomes/uk-rejects-calls-to-publish-detailed-data-of-care-home-deaths-from-covid-19-idUSKBN22P2QO>. Trust in UK government and news media COVID-19 information down, concerns over misinformation from government and politicians up, *Reuters*, June 1, 2020. Available at <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/trust-uk-government-and-news-media-covid-19-information-down-concerns-over-misinformation>.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.diken.com.tr/corona-arastirmasi-dort-ayda-bakanligin-verilerine-guven-yuzde-41-azaldi/>

2005), however, such a link is not sufficiently considered in the study of pandemic politics. Using data from a pre-registered survey experiment conducted in the Republic of Ireland we analyse whether exposing participants to high and low levels of information about the pandemic increased political trust. We find that respondents exposed to high levels of information report a decrease in political trust if their prior levels of trust are already low, and report an increase in political trust if their prior levels of trust are already high. Our findings challenge existing studies that do not find such polarizing effects of information disclosure outside of crisis contexts.

## **POLITICAL TRUST AND INFORMATION DISCLOSURE**

Trust denotes a relationship in which one of the parties is in a vulnerable position. In principle-agent terms, by trusting the agent, the principal puts herself in a vulnerable position, since the agent can decide to harm or betray the principal (Levi and Stoker, 2000). Giving trust is not unconditional, meaning that an agent should possess certain requisites that signal to the principal that the trusted party will not betray or harm them (Hardin, 1999; Levi and Stoker, 2000).

Transparency is identified as one of these key requisites. In an institutional context, transparency is broadly defined ‘as any release of information about institutions that is relevant for evaluating those institutions’ (Lindstedt and Naurin, 2010: 301). By disclosing information about its activities, its outputs and any information of public interest, institutions signal to citizens that they are honest, because they have ‘nothing to hide’; they allow citizens to evaluate whether they are competent; and whether their decisions are legitimate. With this idea in mind, disclosing practices are considered to be a cornerstone of good governance and are advocated by international organisations and civil society groups. The disclosure of information is found to have positive effects on political trust in the context of open data policies (Grimmeilkhuijsen, 2012), freedom of information laws (Worhty, 2010), openness in public administration and government (Welch et al., 2005; Cicatiello et al., 2018).

Scholars describe two mechanisms that link information disclosure to political trust. The first – that we label *information-based* approach – assumes that a better-informed public would be more trusting and suggests that information disclosure affects political trust depending on the level of detail of information provided (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012). According to this approach, higher levels of information about institutions allow citizens to

gain further knowledge about their functioning and performance, which enables them to make reliable judgements about their trustworthiness (Cook et al., 2010; Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer, 2014). In the context of the pandemic, this would mean that higher levels of information about Covid-19 is likely to have a positive effect on political trust as it may allow individuals to acquire more knowledge about the actions of the government in terms of crisis management. This expectation may be particularly relevant in crisis situations, since the saliency of Covid-19 is likely to have a priming effect whereby ‘public attention to an issue influences the weight assigned to it during the formation of political evaluations’ (Hetherington and Rudolph, 2008: 500). On the other hand, if the disclosed information is limited, it may be perceived as partial or inaccurate, which may lead to a decrease in political trust, or it may not generate enough knowledge necessary to judge governmental action (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012).<sup>3</sup>

*H1 Information-based: Higher levels of information disclosure lead to higher levels of trust than lower levels or no information.*

We also consider a second approach, which suggests that it is the act of disclosure that signals trustworthiness to citizens rather than the level of information. According to this mechanism, the effects of information disclosure on political trust derive from an individual’s perception that a government, simply by disclosing information, is being trustworthy, open, and honest (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012). We call this the *disclosure-based* mechanism. Following this approach, we expect that simply presenting information about Covid-19 regardless of its level of detail will lead to an increase in political trust.

*H2 Disclosure-based: The disclosure of information regardless of its levels increases political trust.*

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<sup>3</sup> This approach assumes that individuals are capable of making sense of the information provided (Porumbescu et al., 2017) and the information disclosed is indicative of good performance (Worthy, 2010). We do not find any evidence that these factors affected our findings. See the discussion in Results section.

Both H1 and H2 assume that individuals process given information in an unbiased manner. However, information processing is a motivated process. In processing information, individuals may be motivated to seek out and carefully consider information with the goal of reaching a correct or accurate conclusion. Or, they may be motivated for consistency in their cognitions and to evaluate information in a way that confirms their prior beliefs (Kunda, 1990). *Confirmation bias*, which refers to the process by which individuals search for or interpret information in a way that reinforces their prior convictions is well-documented in political behaviour research (Redlawsk, 2002; Taber and Lodge, 2006). Confirmation bias may affect which information or cues will be considered in the reasoning process. In the case of information disclosure about the pandemic, people with strong prior trust towards the government may be more likely to react to the disclosure of information with increased political trust (Grimmelikhuijsen and Kljin, 2015) as they may be motivated to process this information in line with their prior belief that the government is trustworthy.

*H3a High prior trust: The disclosure of information increases political trust among those with high levels of prior trust in the government.*

To the contrary, those with low levels of prior political trust may be motivated to process disclosed information in a way that is compatible with and even reinforcing their previous levels of low trust. Research shows that rather than simply ignoring information incompatible with one's prior beliefs, individuals often produce counter-arguments to attitudinally discordant information (Redlawsk, 2002). This process may end up further strengthening one's original opinions, in what is known as a backfiring effect (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010). Individuals with prior levels of low trust may end up concluding that the information is not trustworthy or accurate or may select on pieces of information that allow them to produce arguments against the trustworthiness of the government.

*H3b Low prior trust: The disclosure of information decreases political trust among those with low levels of prior trust in the government.*

Taken these expectations together, we predict a polarisation effect whereby the gap between those with low and high prior trust increases when exposed to the treatments. On the basis of the information-based approach, we may however expect the predicted effects in H3a and H3b to be stronger when the information disclosed is more detailed. The disclosure of detailed information may allow those with higher prior trust to conclude that the performance of the government is positive, and signals greater virtue than low information. On the other hand, those with lower levels of prior trust may find more opportunities to blame the government for mistakes (Worthy, 2010) or more points to counter-argue (Taber and Lodge, 2006) when the information is detailed. While we refrain from formulating specific hypotheses for these scenarios, we explore their validity in the analysis.

## DATA AND METHODS

We use data from a survey experiment, which manipulated the level of information disclosed by the government about the Covid-19 cases in the Republic of Ireland.<sup>4</sup> Data was collected as part of a larger project on transparency and political trust between May 8<sup>th</sup> and June 7<sup>th</sup> from 1,804 individuals recruited through *Ireland Thinks* and representative of the population in terms of age, gender and level of education. Below, we analyse data from 618 respondents who were randomly assigned to the low and high Covid-19 information and control conditions.

Like in other European countries, the Government of Ireland experienced a rise in support during the early weeks of the crisis. The Taoiseach's (prime minister) party registered a 13-point increase in support in late March relative to February and this support remained steady well into when our experiment was fielded.<sup>5</sup> Ireland is also representative of the group of European countries that went through a full lockdown. From mid-May, the slope of the cases and deaths curve started to decelerate, and the government announced a phased approach to the re-opening of the country. Between March and June, ca. 27,000 cases and almost 1,800 deaths were registered. This placed the country below Italy or Spain in relative

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<sup>4</sup> The study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of (University) and is pre-registered at <https://osf.io/j58dq>. We registered several hypotheses but due to space restrictions, we only explore the general and the previous attitudes (alternative) hypotheses in this manuscript.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.businesspost.ie/ireland/red-c-poll-response-to-emergency-boosts-support-for-fine-gael-c2f5be7e> and <https://www.rte.ie/news/politics/2020/0531/1143630-politics-poll/>.

terms but above other European counterparts such as Germany in terms of severity of the contagion at the time of the experiment.

We used information from the Irish Covid-19 Datahub, which is managed by the Department of Health (DPH) and used to release daily official updates on the state of the pandemic. We constructed two replicas of the Datahub as treatments. For the low information (LI) treatment we created a dashboard that disclosed only information on the total number of tests, cases, ICU patients (including the healed ones) and the number of deaths. In addition to this information, detailed information about contagion rates by age group and gender, geographical distribution of cases, type of transmission of the virus, a breakdown of the tests performed, admissions and discharges in ICU or hospitals, plus figures and tables that compare the number of cases between Ireland and other countries were provided in the high information (HI) treatment. No information on Covid-19 was presented to those who were assigned to the control condition.

We asked respondents to indicate their level of trust for the government on a 0-10 scale at the beginning of the survey. This constitutes the *pre-treatment trust* variable. Post-treatment trust is measured with questions tapping two different dimensions of political trust in three actors primarily responsible for managing the pandemic: the Government (for taking the leadership role in crisis management), the DPH (for coordinating political decisions about crisis management within the cabinet), and the Health Services Executive (HSE) (for operating the national health care service during the crisis). The two dimensions of political trust are the willingness to put trust in the above institutions (Levi and Stoker, 2000), and the perceived capability of the above institutions to manage the crisis (Hetherington, 1998) (See Online Appendix Table OA1 and OA2 and Figure OA1 and OA2 for descriptive statistics). For ease of presentation, in the analysis below, these items were combined into additive indices of willingness to trust ( $\alpha = .79$ ), and perceived capability ( $\alpha = .89$ ). Our methods follow the existing literature on transparency and trust using experimental research.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There are no statistically significant differences in mean levels of willingness to trust between control ( $\bar{X}_{\text{Control}}=6.783$ ,  $s_{\text{Control}}= 2.866$ ), low information ( $\bar{X}_{\text{LI}} = 6.492$ ,  $s_{\text{LI}} = 2.939$ ), or high information ( $\bar{X}_{\text{HI}} = 6.449$ ,  $s_{\text{HI}} = 3.153$ ) conditions. Difference between mean levels of perceived capability is not statistically different for control ( $\bar{X}_{\text{Control}}=5.415$ ,  $s_{\text{Control}}= 2.847$ ),



low information ( $\bar{X}_{LI} = 5.599$ ,  $s_{LI} = 2.818$ ) and high information ( $\bar{X}_{HI} = 5.549$ ,  $s_{HI} = 3.024$ ) conditions either.<sup>6</sup> These results reject H1 and H2, which predicted direct effects of information treatment on political trust (Also see Online Appendix Table OA3).

**[Table 1 about here]**

Next, we test H3a and H3b, which suggest that the effect of information disclosure is conditional on pre-treatment trust. For this, we collapse pre-treatment trust in government into low, moderate, and high categories (low: 0-3, moderate: 4-6, high: 7-10). Note that results fully replicate when using the original version of pre-treatment trust variable. Table 1 shows the results of the models that include interactions between information disclosure conditions (HI vs. LI) and pre-treatment trust. Both willingness to trust and perceived capability are strongly influenced by previous levels of trust. Respondents with low pre-treatment trust report substantially lower levels of post-treatment trust compared to those with moderate or high levels of pre-treatment trust. We also find that pre-treatment trust moderates the effect of the HI treatment for both dependent variables. The conditional effects plots presented in Figure 1 indicate that low pre-treatment trust *decreases* the effect of HI on willingness to trust and perceived capability while high pre-treatment trust *increases* the effect of HI on these dependent variables. These effects are quite substantive. All else being equal, the predicted *increase* between HI and control treatment in perceived capability (on a 0-10 scale) is 1-point for respondents with high levels of pre-treatment trust while the predicted *decrease* is 0.6-point for respondents with low levels of pre-treatment trust (Model 2b).

**[Figure 1 about here]**

These results provide strong support for hypotheses H3a and H3b and are in line with some recent findings that show that transparency can have *negative* effects on political trust (Worthy 2010, de Fine Licht 2011). The evidence for the polarising effect of high levels of

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<sup>6</sup> t-tests for differences of means for HI vs LI (H1); HI vs control (H1/H2); LI vs Control (H2) all yield  $p > .05$  for both willingness to trust and perceived capability.

information challenges some previous findings found in the transparency literature (Grimmeilkhuijsen and Meijer, 2014; Grimmeilkhuijsen and Kljin, 2015) but is in line with recent studies that discover polarising effects of other variables such as the role of exposure to expert opinions on support for Covid-19 measures (Heinzel and Liese, 2021).

Our results are robust to different model specifications and variable operationalisations (See Online Appendix Tables OA4 – OA6). However, the moderation effects are consistently significant only as far as the HI treatment is concerned. We hence reject the expectation of disclosure-based models that the level of information disclosure does not matter. If the effects of information release on political trust were primarily influenced by the act of disclosure itself, we would have found conditional effects for LI condition as well. We also find that citizens' ability or motivation to comprehend the information provided do not moderate the effect of treatments on political trust (See Online Appendix Tables OA7-OA9).

These findings also help us to further consider the backfiring effects. Individuals with low levels of political trust tend to negatively evaluate government performance (Hetherington and Rudolph, 2015). If the treatments worked by reminding respondents of the government's 'poor' performance in the management of Covid-19, we would have seen a similar backlash effect in the LI treatment. In addition, we find that pre-treatment trust does not moderate the effect of the treatments on government performance evaluations, which was measured with a survey item tapping confidence that the government is 'doing a good job' in responding to the coronavirus outbreak (See Online Appendix Table OA10). We conclude that the salience of government's handling of the Covid-19 crisis or evaluations of its performance are not potential mechanisms that explain the backfiring effect.

We also test whether the treatments increased scepticism towards the information provided among those with low pre-treatment trust. Using a survey item about the extent to which respondents found the 'information disclosed by the Department of Health as accurate', we found no evidence that HI treatment increased scepticism among those with low levels of pre-treatment trust (See Online Appendix Table OA11 and Figure OA3)<sup>7</sup>. Thus, we find that the HI treatment does not necessarily increase scepticism towards the information provided. This might be interpreted as good news, as high levels of distrust and

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<sup>7</sup> We still find a positive and significant effect of the HI treatment for respondents with high levels of pre-treatment trust. The probability of *strongly agreeing* with the statement that 'the information disclosed by the Department of Health is accurate' increases by ca. 15% for respondents with high levels of pre-treatment trust exposed to HI compared to the control group.

scepticism of information provided by the governments could increase belief in conspiracy theories, fake news, and misinformation (Van Bavel et al., 2020).

Finally, to further strengthen our conclusions, we test whether pre-treatment trust moderates the effect of the treatments on support for government crisis management policies (Online Appendix Table OA12). We believe that this item is more directly related to the decision to place vulnerability in the hands of government (c.f Levi and Stoker, 2000) and comply with its orders and advice than the government's performance evaluations. Respondents with low levels of pre-treatment trust in the HI condition are about 30-38% more likely to *strongly disagree* or *disagree* with the statement 'I support the government policies' on crisis management than the control group. On the other hand, those with moderate or high levels of pre-treatment trust in the HI condition are 10-15% more likely to *strongly support* the same statement than those in the control group. Based on these findings, we conclude that the most plausible explanation for the backfiring effect is motivated reasoning rather than performance evaluations or increased scepticism of information provided. As we have predicted, prior trust influences one's process of finding in the disclosed information a reason to refuse or to accept 'to put trust in the hands of the government' and support its policies and guidelines.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our findings partly lead to a pessimistic conclusion in the sense that the disclosure of detailed information does not lead to an overall increase in political trust. We find that high levels of information disclosure only lead to increased political trust among people with stronger prior trust in government, and have no effect on those with moderate levels of prior trust. More importantly, exposure to high levels of information leads to a backfiring effect for people with lower levels of trust, further polarizing those with high and low levels of trust.

There are reasons to be concerned about the backfiring effects of information disclosure. In an effort to gain the trust and confidence of its citizens, governments run the risk of triggering further distrust among citizens who are already sceptical of their actions. Political trust is associated to high voluntary compliance with laws and regulations (Marien and Hooghe, 2011) including compliance with public health advice and policies during Covid-19 (Goldstein and Wiedman, 2020; Bargain and Aminjonov, 2020). While we did not

investigate the implications of transparency on actual compliance, it is possible that it has far-reaching effects beyond political trust.

These findings may also be interpreted in an optimistic manner, in the sense that governments can capitalize on unusually high levels of trust observed at the beginning of the crisis to sustain citizen trust. Han et al. (2020) showed that governments that were perceived to deliver clear messages in response to Covid-19 were more likely to be trusted by their citizens. Thus, governments could seize such opportunities to keep levels of trust high by providing detailed information about the pandemic to their citizens.

Our study has a number of limitations and the results should be interpreted with caution. Our experiment was carried out when Europe and Ireland were already some way into the crisis and the number of infections started to decline. The results may have been different if the study was conducted at the beginning of the pandemic. In addition, it is not possible to make inferences about the long-term consequences of information disclosure with a one-off experimental treatment.

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### **DECLARATION OF INTERESTS**

The authors declare no potential competing interests.

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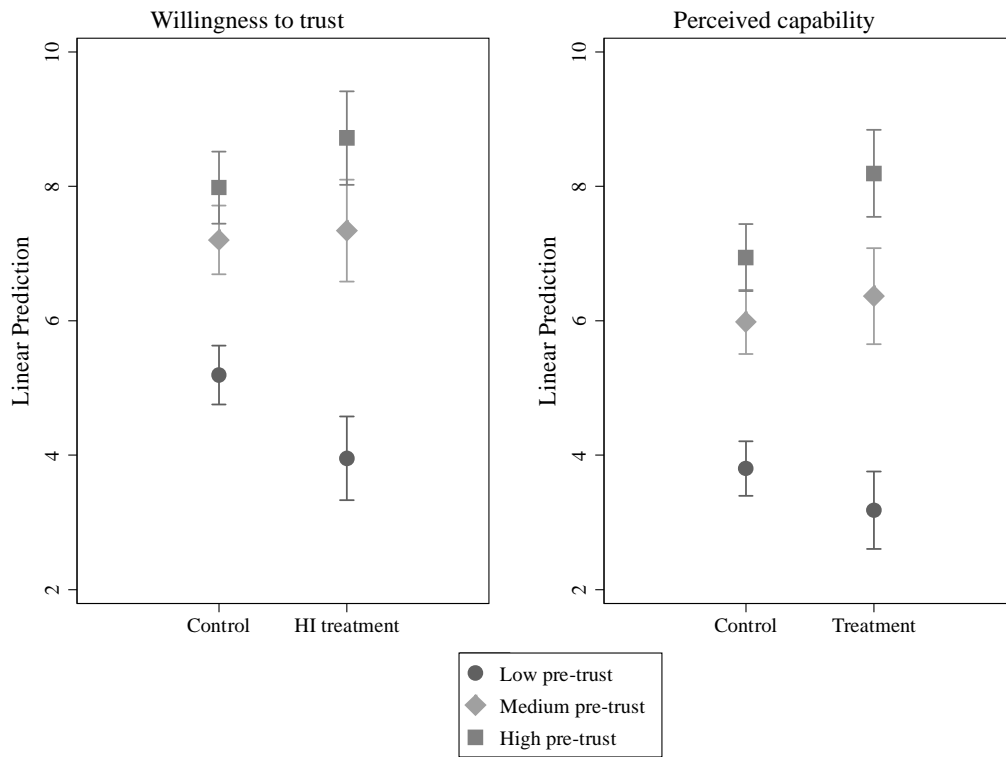


**Table 1. OLS models for DVs of post-treatment political trust**

VARIABLES	(1a)	(1b)	(2a)	(2b)
	Willingness to trust	Willingness to trust	Perceived capability	Perceived capability
LI Treatment	-0.482 (0.399)	-0.568 (0.411)	0.046 (0.367)	-0.017 (0.381)
HI Treatment	-1.230*** (0.391)	-1.242*** (0.407)	-0.740** (0.360)	-0.622 (0.377)
Low pre-trust	(ref.)	(ref.)	(ref.)	
Moderate pre-trust	2.309*** (0.442)	1.880*** (0.462)	2.537*** (0.406)	2.288*** (0.428)
High pre-trust	2.963*** (0.458)	2.482*** (0.484)	3.156*** (0.421)	2.779*** (0.449)
HI * Low pre-trust	(ref.)	(ref.)	(ref.)	(ref.)
HI * Medium pre-trust	1.247** (0.612)	1.381** (0.636)	1.203** (0.568)	1.005* (0.593)
HI * High pre-trust	1.802*** (0.613)	1.979*** (0.635)	1.892*** (0.563)	1.875*** (0.589)
LI * Low pre-trust	(ref.)	(ref.)	(ref.)	(ref.)
LI * Medium pre-trust	0.332 (0.627)	0.385 (0.644)	-0.319 (0.576)	-0.323 (0.598)
LI * High pre-trust	0.640 (0.621)	0.917 (0.639)	0.849 (0.572)	1.066* (0.594)
Age		0.061 (0.075)		0.078 (0.070)
Gender		-0.068 (0.220)		-0.282 (0.204)
Education (lv.)		0.127 (0.088)		0.091 (0.082)
Income		0.000 (0.051)		0.0184 (0.048)
Urban		0.635*** (0.221)		0.461** (0.206)
Left-Right		0.118** (0.634)		0.118** (0.051)
Constant	5.144*** (0.286)	3.771*** (0.634)	3.667*** (0.263)	2.360*** (0.589)
Observations	577	525	572	522
R-squared	0.333	0.339	0.402	0.405

*Unstandardized coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$*

**Figure 1. Predicted marginal effect of HI condition (vs Control) on indices of political trust (from Models 1b and 2b) with 95% Confidence Intervals**



## **FIGURE CAPTIONS**

Figure 1. Predicted marginal effect of HI condition (vs Control) on indices of political trust (from Models 1b and 2b) with 95% Confidence Intervals