Disillusioning democracy

Trust and political participation in Italy: results from the TRUEDEM research

Edited by Domenico Maddaloni

FrancoAngeli
OPEN ACCESS

Sociologia Politica

Collana diretta da **Gianfranco Bettin Lattes, Pietro Fantozzi, Arianna Montanari, Roberto Segatori, Lorenzo Viviani**

Comitato di coordinamento:
Gianfranco Bettin Lattes (direttore); Ernesto d'Albergo (Sapienza Università di Roma); Donatella della Porta (Istituto Italiano di Scienze Umane, Firenze); Klaus Eder (Humboldt Universität, Berlino); Pietro Fantozzi (Università della Calabria); Arianna Montanari (Sapienza Università di Roma); Flaminia Saccà (Sapienza Università di Roma); Roberto Segatori (Università di Perugia); Paolo Segatti (Università di Milano); Paolo Turi (Università di Firenze).

Comitato di redazione:
Antonella Coco (Centro Alti Studi della Difesa Roma); Maria Mirabelli (Università della Calabria); Milena Meo (Università di Messina); Marco Damiani (Università di Perugia); Maria Cristina Marchetti (Sapienza Università di Roma); Fabio de Nardis (Università del Salento); Cristiano Vezzoni (Università di Milano); Lorenzo Viviani (Università di Pisa).

Comitato scientifico:
Antonio Alaminos (Università di Alicante); Giovanni Barbieri (Università di Perugia); Mauro Barisione (Università di Milano); Michael Braun (Universität Mannheim); Antonio Costabile (Università della Calabria); Colin Crouch (Warwick Business School); Mario Diani (Università di Trento); Virginie Guiraudon (SciencesPO); Steffen Mau (Universität Bremen); Andrea Millefiorini (Università della Campania Luigi Vanvitelli); Stefano Monti Bragadin (Università di Genova); Anne Muxel (SciencesPO); Louisa Parks (Università di Trieste); Andrea Pirni (Università di Genova); Gloria Pirzio (Sapienza Università di Roma); Carlo Ruzza (Università di Trento); Ambrogio Santambrogio (Università di Perugia); Sidney G. Tarrow (Cornell University, New York); José Félix Tezanos (Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, Madrid); Tommaso Vitale (SciencesPO).

La globalizzazione determina, tra i suoi effetti maggiormente problematici, una crisi profonda della politica e della cultura politica democratica. La sociologia politica italiana e le nuove generazioni di ricercatori che la animano hanno una missione cruciale, vale a dire attualizzare il percorso dei classici da Karl Marx e Max Weber agli elitisti, adeguandone le categorie analitiche alla complessità della postmodernità. La nuova centralità delle relazioni transnazionali e la questione dell'Europa suggeriscono l'uso del metodo comparativo come cornice di una riflessione sociologica innovativa. La collana intende tematizzare l'intreccio tra mutamento sociale e mutamento politico nella consapevolezza che il cambiamento investe sia le questioni di *polity*, relative agli assetti istituzionali e alla crisi della tradizionale forma-Stato, sia le dinamiche di *politics*, con la personalizzazione e la mediatizzazione del potere, sia infine le *policies*, condizionate dalle ricorrenti ondate neo-liberiste. La collana promuove studi e ricerche che interpretano gli elementi più significativi di queste trasformazioni spingendosi a esplorare nuove categorie, nuovi movimenti e nuove tematiche.

I volumi pubblicati sono sottoposti alla valutazione anonima di almeno due referee esperti.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

OPEN ACCESS
FrancoAngeli solution

This volume is published in open access format, i.e. the file of the entire work can be freely downloaded from the FrancoAngeli Open Access platform (http://bit.ly/francoangeli-oa).
On the FrancoAngeli Open Access platform, it is possible to publish articles and monographs, according to ethical and quality standards while ensuring open access to the content itself. It guarantees the preservation in the major international OA archives and repositories. Through the integration with its entire catalog of publications and series, FrancoAngeli also maximizes visibility, user accessibility and impact for the author.

Read more: Publish with us (francoangeli.it)

Readers who wish to find out about the books and periodicals published
by us can visit our website www.francoangeli.it and subscribe to "Keep me informed"
service to receive e-mail notifications.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Disillusioning democracy

Trust and political participation in Italy: results from the TRUEDEM research

Edited by Domenico Maddaloni

FrancoAngeli OPEN ACCESS

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

This book has been prepared with the support of the TRUEDEM "Trust in European Democracies" research project funded under the European Union's Horizon research and innovation program (grant agreement No 101095237). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or Horizon research and innovation program. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Isbn: 9788835185574

Isbn e-book Open Access: 9788835191674

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy.

This work, and each part thereof, is protected by copyright law and is published in this digital version under the license *Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International* (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).
Text and Data Mining (TDM), AI training and similar technologies rights are reserved.

By downloading this work, the User accepts all the conditions of the license agreement for the work as stated and set out on the website
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Zigong asked about the way of governing. The Master said, "Sufficient food, a well-equipped army, and the trust of the common people."
Zigong said, "Suppose you are forced to do away with one, which of the three would you let go first?"
The Master said, "The army."
Zigong continued, "Suppose you are forced to give up one more, which of the two would you let go now?"
The Master said, "Food. Death has been the human lot since the beginning of time, but a state cannot survive if it does not have the trust of the common people."

Confucius, *The Analects. Translated with an Introduction and Commentary by Annping Chin*, Penguin Books, New York, 2014, section 12.7 (pp. 368-369)

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Contents

Introduction, by *Felice Addeo* and *Domenico Maddaloni* pag. 9

1. **The agent's perspective: a qualitative survey of Italian politicians and civil servants**, by *Marialaura Ammirato, Valentina D'Auria* and *Domenico Maddaloni* » 23
   1.1. The research process: surveying politicians and public officials » 24
   1.2. Politicians' perspectives on trust and trustworthiness » 26
   1.3. State and dynamics of trust in Italy » 33
   1.4. Democratic innovations: a view from above » 38
   Concluding remarks » 40

2. **The stakeholders' perspective: CSO leaders on political trust in Italy today**, by *Valentina D'Auria* and *Jessica Maglio* » 42
   2.1. The research process: surveying Italian CSOs representatives » 43
   2.2. Defining trust and political trustworthiness » 45
   2.3. The state and dynamics of trust in Italy » 50
   2.4. Democratic innovations: CSOs viewpoint » 56
   Concluding remarks » 59

3. **The principal's perspective: citizens' views on democratic politics in Italy**, by *Laurie Beaudonnet* and *Florent Guntz* » 62
   3.1. Research methodology » 63
   3.2. Distance and attitudes towards politics » 65

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

3.3. Trust in political institutions and leaders pag. 70
3.4. Placing citizens at the centre of politics » 75
Concluding remarks » 79

4. **Technocracy and political trust in Italy**, by *Domenico Maddaloni* and *Domenico Fruncillo* » 81
4.1. The opinions of politicians and civil servants » 83
4.2. The opinions of civil society organisation leaders » 87
4.3. Citizens' opinions » 90
4.4. A comparison between the target groups » 93
Concluding remarks » 96

5. **Norms, perceptions and trust in Italy: a quantitative survey**, by *Angela Delli Paoli* » 100
5.1. Theoretical background » 101
5.2. TRUEDEM quantitative research methodology » 102
5.3. Levels and indices of trust » 104
5.4. Perceived trustworthiness » 110
5.5. Normative trustworthiness » 115
5.6. Trustworthiness and trust » 122
Concluding remarks » 127

Conclusions, by *Domenico Fruncillo* and *Domenico Maddaloni* » 131

References » 141

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Introduction

by Felice Addeo and Domenico Maddaloni

A Google search carried out on 8 October 2025 using the keywords "trust" and "Italy" ranks a post on the Pirelli Foundation website with the very eloquent title *Italy is in a crisis of trust, between electoral abstention, fiscal imbalances, and low levels of education and culture* in first place[1]. Perhaps there could be no better start to the journey we are about to embark on around the results of the TRUEDEM research on political trust in European countries. Starting in 2023, the network of 12 partner countries led by Christian Haerpfer (University of Vienna) and Pippa Norris (Harvard University) studied the state and dynamics of trust in European countries in order to understand the factors that influence it and the effects it has on the behaviour of institutions, political actors, and ordinary citizens. In this volume, the working group at the University of Salerno, Italian partner in the TRUEDEM network, offers an initial reading of some of the results this complex research project has produced regarding our country.

More specifically, we will discuss some of the results of the empirical surveys we carried out between 2024 and 2025 on various target groups and using multiple research techniques. In particular, between spring and summer 2024, we conducted 19 interviews with Italian politicians and public officials at the European, national, regional, and local levels. We also interviewed 18 stakeholders in representative democracy, namely leaders of civil society organisations (trade unions, business associations, citizens' advocacy organisations, and social movements), again at different action levels. At the same time, we – in collaboration with the University of Montreal – organised four focus group debates with citizens residing

1. www.fondazionepirelli.org/it/cultura-dimpresa/blog/litalia-e-in-crisi-di-fiducia-tra-astensione-elettorale-squilibri-fiscali-e-scarsi-livelli-di-formazione-e-cultura. Retrieved on 8 October, 2025.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

in the Salerno area, aggregated according to some socio-demographic features. These target groups were (1) young urban people with tertiary education, (2) middle-aged rural people with secondary education, (3) senior urban people with tertiary education, and (4) young suburban people with secondary education. From eight to ten people participated in each of the meetings. Finally, the TRUEDEM consortium commissioned some research agencies to conduct a pan-European online survey during the summer of 2025. The Italian sample alone included 1,215 people.

Before we continue with the results analysis, a few points should be clarified. The TRUEDEM empirical survey not only collected data on the state and dynamics of trust, but also considered a wide variety of dimensions that fall within the causes, characteristics or consequences of political trust in European countries' representative democracies. Therefore, the analyses in this volume focus only on a small portion of this data. It should also be added that, in this volume, we present a "snapshot" of a national case in the broader context of a comparative research. Such a snapshot can raise some epistemological issues. By limiting the analysis to a single national case, we can examine it in greater depth and acquire more detailed knowledge. At the same time, however, this approach restricts the possibility of generalising the main findings of the research itself. The knowledge we gain from this is, in a sense, purely local and therefore imperfect. However, we know that an imperfect understanding of a phenomenon is always better than no understanding at all. Finally, the entire TRUEDEM research project – and therefore also this Italian "snapshot" – is based on a theoretical framework that is important to understand in order to better appreciate the research process and its results. We will therefore now turn our attention to a brief description of this framework and its relationship with the more general debate on political trust and democracy.

Theoretical framework: Trust, trustworthiness and political behaviour

The theoretical framework to which the TRUEDEM research refers has been defined by Pippa Norris in her recent book *In Praise of Scepticism* (Norris, 2022). Norris's approach, developed within the broader context of rational choice theory and specifically the principal-agent model, suggests that representative democracies are increasingly characterised by a specific type of trust known as sceptical trust.

The latter differs from credulous trust, which consists of citizens' ideological adherence to the vision claimed by a political actor or belief in

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

the charismatic character of that actor or their collaborators. It also differs from cynical mistrust, which consists of support for an institution or political actor motivated exclusively by the satisfaction of immediate material interests. On the other hand, sceptical trust, as well as the complementary concept of sceptical mistrust, is based on judgements of trustworthiness made by citizens, who critically assess the competence, integrity, and impartiality of political actors, together with the strength of political institutions' accountability guardrails. «Sceptical thinking implies a deliberative decision-making process to trust someone or something based on conscious choices, logical reasoning, and careful weighing of the available information, rather than relying upon affective biases, cultural feelings, gut instincts, or habitual loyalties» (Norris, 2022: 166).

Therefore, Norris's perspective emphasises the importance of individual cognitive skills and knowledge, as well as the broader information environment, in strengthening accurate evaluations of trustworthiness. In this perspective, open societies with access to diverse viewpoints and critical education are considered conducive to fostering such skills. Norris, therefore, views more developed societies, including Italy, as environments where sceptical trust is more widespread due to economic development and social and cultural modernisation. To support this assertion, she highlights the recent fluctuating trends in political trust observed in comparative international surveys, such as the World Values Survey, which align more closely with the idea of an evolution of political attitudes towards sceptical trust rather than a general decline of trust in representative democracy.

However, her analysis acknowledges the persistence of contextual factors which influence both levels of social and political trust and the associated political behaviours in a cross-national perspective. These factors are mainly cultural, but they are also linked to economic conditions and the individual's position in the system of inequalities: «In both open and closed societies, people living in economically insecure households expressed significantly less trust in their government, including the unemployed, poor and low income, and those with declining social mobility» (Norris, 2022: 166).

It is rather intriguing that the types of trust proposed by Norris closely resemble the types of voting developed by Arturo Parisi and Gianfranco Pasquino back in the 1980s (Parisi and Pasquino, 1985; see also Parisi, 1995). They distinguished between (1) the loyalty vote, defined by the voter's adherence to the ideology of a specific party; (2) the exchange vote, defined by a personal relationship between the voters and the candidate, in which the former promise their vote in exchange for material benefits; and (3) the opinion vote, based on a rational assessment of the political pro-

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

grams of competing parties. Furthermore, Parisi and Pasquino argued that the ongoing process of modernisation would likely lead to a weakening of the first two types of voters' behaviour in favour of the third. The main difference between this theoretical perspective and Norris's proposal lies in the epistemological level of analysis, since Parisi and Pasquino focused exclusively on electoral participation. Norris, on the other hand, believes that the dynamics of trust influence not only electoral behaviour but the entire range of citizens' political activities in the context of representative democracies. For this reason, the TRUEDEM research, in addition to including a study of the relationship between trust and citizens' voting (or non-voting) behaviour (Addeo et al., 2025), has also developed along other lines of investigation, including the one we are discussing here.

However, the analysis of voting carried out by Parisi and Pasquino and Norris's theory of trust invite us to examine more closely the specific features of individual national cases. For this reason, we will now focus on the main features of the Italian political development within the broader context of the structural and cultural changes that occurred in Italian society in the post-WWII era.

The political system in post-war Italy

After the fall of the Fascist regime, the 1946 national referendum abolished the monarchy and established a republic, restoring representative democracy. The first democratic Parliament used proportional voting to represent all political views. Thus, a new political environment arose with several parties and considerable ideological polarisation (Sartori, 1982). In the so-called "First Republic" period (1948-1992), the Christian Democrats ruled the country in a precarious and contentious coalition with other liberal-democratic and social-democratic parties. These coalitions prevented the Communist Party, the political force with the largest electoral following after the Christian Democrats, from entering the national government (Galli, 1967). However, strong ideological opposition sparked involvement and mobilisation, resulting in high voter turnout levels. The liberal "opinion vote" was almost non-existent, replaced by the "loyalty vote" associated with mass parties and the clientelist "exchange vote" in poorer socioeconomic strata and peripheral areas. However, an informal political compromise between the ruling elites and the upper classes in the more advanced and the more backward regions allowed both high economic growth and a strong socio-cultural modernisation (Ginsborg, 2006). During this same period, the northeastern and central regions undertook a path

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

of development based on local small business networks, which differed both from the large-scale business economy of the northwestern metropolitan areas and from the difficult economic growth of the southern regions and islands (Bagnasco, 1977). Several scholars (e.g., Trigilia, 1986) pointed out that this growth path was associated with strong local social cohesion. They also noted that this feature was linked to a high propensity for associationism and a firm adherence to the two prevailing political subcultures – Christian Democratic in the northeast and Socialist and Communist in both Emilia Romagna and the central regions.

However, since the 1970s, international economic restructuring and integration have increasingly harmed the Italian development model, thus rapidly weakening the two main parties' electoral bases and causing executive branch instability (Calise, 1998). The fall of eastern European communist regimes in the 1980s and 1990s exacerbated these shifts (Scoppola, 2021). The intertwining of these crisis lines boosted a growing indignation over the Italian political class's corruption, as revealed by judicial investigations (Bull and Rhodes, 1997). From 1992 until the present, the "Second Republic" has faced escalating instability. Voter turnout is declining in all types of elections (Fruncillo, 2004) and disparities in participation are increasing in terms of age, social class and geographical area of residence (Marini and Piccolino, 2023). Apathy and disaffection are developing among the poor and uneducated, particularly in the southern regions (Chiaromonte, 2023). However, political frustration drives ephemeral mobilisations in these communities, which are increasingly distinguished by disillusionment and a revival of clientelism and patronage, especially in local elections.

Since the 1990s, the Italian political system has followed a pattern of fragmented bipolarism (Vassallo, 2016), in which electoral rivalry develops around two internally heterogeneous poles that often do not assure government stability. Mass parties, which mobilised citizens through ideology, were quickly replaced by "catch-all" parties in a post-democratic scenario (Crouch, 2004). Personal parties like Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, national populist parties like the Movimento Cinque Stelle, territorial populist parties like the Lega Nord, and radical right-wing parties like Fratelli d'Italia have emerged. Disillusionment with government policies drives frequent government turnover, with centre-right and centre-left ruling coalitions and some "technocratic" cabinets based on grand coalition logic. Populist governments and the first radical right-wing presidency accelerated this process in 2018 and 2022 (Chiaramonte et al., 2022; Garzia, 2023). Frequent changes in the electoral rules (from proportional representation to majoritarianism to hybrid systems) have not stabilised the Italian

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

political arena. In this framework, EU integration is increasing political and institutional complexity. The European Union is constantly putting pressure on the Italian party system, creating new opportunities but also new constraints. This may lead to frequent changes in electoral dynamics and governance rules (Piccolino, Puleo and Soare, 2020). At the same time, it also fosters various kinds of Euroscepticism and populism (Conti, Marangoni and Verzichelli, 2020).

As a result, Italy's democratic performance is quite low in terms of rule of law, accountability, and competition, compared with other European countries (Panzano and Marini, 2025). No surprise that, according to recent cross-country surveys, Italians show poor political or institutional trust compared to other European countries (Addeo et al., 2025). This result does not fit well with Parisi and Pasquino's model, insofar as they did not consider citizens' possible disaffection in the face of the political system's disappointing performance. However, it may be more consistent with Norris's model, insofar as it predicts that disturbances in the institutional environment and communication processes, as well as an unequal distribution of civic skills among citizens, affect the state and dynamics of trust, and therefore the levels and features of citizens' democratic participation.

Political and non-political trust in Italy

These considerations lead us to address one final aspect that can be useful for defining the context of our research, namely medium- and long-term trends in trust and the related differences between Europe's territorial areas. Following a pattern common to other southern European countries, the political and institutional trust levels measured in international surveys for Italy appear to be consistently lower than those measured among northern European citizens, particularly Scandinavians (Norris, 2022). The historical exception to this rule concerns trust in the social circles closest to the individual, namely family, relatives, neighbours, or personal friends, for which the values observed in Italy appear to be higher than those in northern European countries. Over time, the widespread attitude among Italians has been to compensate for the shortcomings they encounter in the public sphere with the solidarity they receive (and provide) in the interaction networks mentioned above (Martinelli and Chiesi, 2002). The different paths to modernity experienced in different regions of Europe can explain these variations. In the case of Italy, this also tends to explain the differences in both the levels of trust and the performance offered at the systemic level

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

between different geographical areas, particularly between the North and the South (Putnam, 1993).

In this framework, another important intervening variable is generalised trust. According to Putnam, trust "in others" is associated with a propensity to engage in civic activities and therefore in voluntary movements and organisations (trade unions, environmental movements, civil rights organisations, etc.). The greater the density of these movements and associations, the greater the propensity to engage in political activities as a natural consequence of the civic activism (see also Putnam, 2000). In this regard, TRUEDEM research has shown that differences between European countries in turnout levels in national parliamentary elections are also linked to differences in levels of generalised trust (Addeo et al., 2025). In the context of Italy, this data necessitates careful consideration, as generalised trust is intricately linked to the propensity for associationism, or what is sometimes referred to as "public social capital" (see, for instance, Bagnasco et al., 2001). Moreover, research on this topic (Putnam, 1993) reveals notable disparities among Italian regions as regards the prevalence of this attitude among citizens.

We may conclude this section by noting that studies on trust in political systems reinforce the need to promote governmental legitimacy through inclusive dialogue and responsive governance (Arnone et al., 2025). Such efforts are crucial to ensuring that progress towards democracy is maintained and resonates across all segments of society, ultimately consolidating Italy's position as a robust democracy in the European and global arenas.

Methodological note

The context we have just described identifies the field of our research, at least as regards Italy. Its main purpose is to understand how different categories of actors perceive the relationship between political elites, political institutions, and public bodies on the one hand, and civil society on the other.

Who trusts whom, for what, and how, in Italy today? How does the context, as perceived by the actors, reinforce or inhibit the mechanisms of trust? In the following chapters, we will attempt to provide some answers to these questions. In doing so, we will respect the epistemological distance between the target groups and the survey techniques. However, before briefly describing what readers can find in the following chapters, it is appropriate to outline the specific characteristics of the TRUEDEM

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

research process. The latter is notable for its breadth, since the data collection conducted through TRUEDEM research covered various European countries. However, it is also notable for the coordinated use of different empirical research tools covering qualitative and quantitative dimensions.

TRUEDEM qualitative data collection (Kizilova et al., 2024) has aimed to understand how individuals assess the trustworthiness of the political system, the processes involved in their judgement formation, and the individual and collective elements that affect trust. Given that trust is fundamentally relational and situational (Van der Meer and Zmerli, 2017), our qualitative research aims to examine the perceptions of several stakeholders in the trust dynamic: individuals, political elites, and civil society organisations. Therefore, political trust (and mistrust) has been elucidated by examining the perceptions and expectations of citizens, political elites, and civil society organisations towards the political system and each other.

Among the few studies that have concurrently examined elite and ordinary perceptions of the political system, the majority have shown significant disparities among agents. Recent research indicates that citizens possess a conception of "the good politician" (Clarke et al., 2018) that prioritises authenticity and accessibility (Valgarðsson et al., 2020). This shared idea markedly contrasts with the functions executed by highly professionalised political actors – a contrast that in itself provides a clear explanation for the emergence of anti-politics. Empirical studies reveal substantial disparities in perspectives and assessments of democracy among political elites, public officials, and citizens, as well as within the citizenry itself (Ferrin and Kriesi, 2016; Kotze and Garcia-Rivero, 2017). In this context, civil society organisations (CSOs) may facilitate the connection between citizens and political actors – or, conversely, function as democratic watchdogs illuminating the deficiencies in the political system's credibility. Consequently, our method for analysing political trust has been to investigate the intersections and discrepancies in the expectations and evaluations of the political system among citizens, civil society organisations, and elites.

The study of political elites has a longstanding heritage in social and political research. Elites are typically defined as a small cohort of individuals who wield disproportionate power and influence. Political elites are individuals who possess power, authority, and exert influence inside political institutions capable of shaping or affecting political outcomes. To examine the elites' opinions and attitudes in the context of their dyadic relationship with citizens, TRUEDEM has employed a kind of semi-structured interview (Silverman, 2010) that combines most features of the expert interview and the elite interview. An expert interview (or key informant interview) is

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

a qualitative, semi-structured, or open interview conducted with someone possessing substantial knowledge or skill in a specific domain. An elite interview is a qualitative open interview carried out with an informant who apparently is part of the elite, since he (she) is in a position of authority. In an elite interview, the potential interviewee typically holds functional authority and a high position within a specific institutional domain. Therefore, information gathered from expert interviews will likely be precise, whereas responses from elites may be somewhat biased. However, although professionals have comprehensive expertise in their respective domains, elites have access to superior information, rendering them a significant target group in socio political research. In the TRUEDEM qualitative survey, we tried integrating aspects of expert and elite interviews. The interviewed politicians and public officers have highly valuable knowledge of their country's specific context and the nuances of political decision-making. Consequently, their perspectives – regardless of factual accuracy – offer significant insights into the functioning of the political system within their country and Europe and the influence of public perceptions of trust and trustworthiness on its evolution. Qualitative interviews can be categorised in many forms based on the specific knowledge they intend to generate. In TRUEDEM, the expert interviews have been designed to primarily elicit two specific categories of knowledge: factual information regarding the political system and public opinion data on political trust on one side, and the experts' subjective perspectives on these processes, their context, and their causes, on the other (Kizilova et al., 2024).

The rationale for the study of CSOs leaders lies in the nature and position of these social bodies. The term "civil society organisations" (CSOs) denotes the diverse spectrum of nongovernmental entities that engage in public life, articulating the interests and values of their constituents, grounded in ethical, cultural, political, scientific, or religious principles. CSOs offer local knowledge and experience which may be seen as fundamental to the policymaking process. They have a significant role as intermediaries between the political system and the public, enabling them to articulate citizens' perspectives, including those of marginalised and under-represented groups (Sintos et al., 2024). Civil society organisations influence the political system by consolidating and articulating the interests of diverse social groupings, promoting ideals, and enhancing citizens' capacity for political participation. Interactions with CSOs can enhance policymaking and foster transparency and accountability in the public sector. In the context of TRUEDEM research, representatives of civil society organisations and social movements were engaged in consultations as active participants in research, users of the project findings, and target groups

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

for project distribution, communication, and exploitation. Consultations with CSOs leaders are a process in which information, opinions, and advice are obtained on the issue of the relationship between citizens and the political system in the context of representative democracies. Consultations promote a two-way contact with stakeholders, thereby customising the research process to meet specific demands and development objectives, while also increasing the policy relevance of the outcomes (Kizilova et al., 2024). The semi-structured interview (Silverman, 2010) has been used to consult CSOs in TRUEDEM research.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) (Bloor et al. 2001; Kristiansen & Grønkjær 2018) consist of 8-10 individuals selected based on comparable demographics, psychographics, social attitudes or behaviours who participate in a dialogue on a specific subject, facilitated by a qualified moderator. They are a qualitative data collection technique that enables the understanding of the qualitative attributes of social processes and political events. Specifically, focus group discussions enable a better understanding of how individuals formulate judgements throughout social interactions. Participants in FGDs are invited to express their opinions in an open format, without predefined response options. Participants are encouraged to articulate their views through a sequence of open-ended enquiries posed by the moderator. They may also receive graphical materials, video clips, and short narratives in order to stimulate conversation. Moderation (including enquiries and subsequent questions, visual aids, and printed materials) seeks to facilitate conversations by employing open-ended questions and encouraging participation. In TRUEDEM research, FGDs were primarily aimed at revealing the qualitative dimensions of the trust-building process, thus complementing the empirical data collection both on the qualitative and the quantitative side (Kizilova et al., 2024).

The TRUEDEM qualitative research group, led by Céline Belot (University of Grenoble), has worked at a collaborative coding process in NVivo among all the groups involved in the research to facilitate a comparative analysis of the results obtained. However, since this process is still ongoing at the time of writing (December 2025), we thought it best to use a different analysis method that combines two interpretation processes. The first consists of the usual and well-established interpretative procedure that relies on sociological imagination, previous experience, and researchers' interaction (Silverman, 2015). The second is artificial intelligence, which allows us to search for latent patterns in the mass of data. In this second analysis, we used two chatbots, ChatGPT and Qwen, and then compared the responses obtained to our queries. Although this procedure has not yet been fully codified in research methodology literature, we be-

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

lieve it can provide useful insights to scholars active in social and political research.

Finally, regarding the quantitative data collected by the TRUEDEM research consortium, the latter carried out a cross-national online survey (Biffignandi and Betlehem, 2021) on political trust and democratic attitudes across 24 EU member states in the summer of 2025. The included nations were Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden. 29,755 participants were surveyed, comprising approximately 1,200 respondents from each country (1,215 from Italy) and 1,500 from France and Germany. The national samples were constructed to mirror as much as possible the demographic composition of each population, ensuring comparability among countries. The questionnaire encompasses a wide array of subjects about democracy and trust. For the limited purposes of this work, suffice it to say that it assesses confidence in parliaments, governments, political parties, the judiciary, the European Union, and international organisations, as well as perceptions of competence, fairness, accountability, and honesty[2]. To this end, TRUEDEM researchers employed a wide range of techniques to gather respondents' opinions. Like the qualitative interview guidelines and the Focus Group guidelines, the questionnaire was also translated into the national language of each of the countries involved in the sample survey.

Outline of the book

In the first chapter, Marialaura Ammirato, Valentina D'Auria and Domenico Maddaloni analyse the views of politicians and officials interviewed on their relationship with Italian citizens. The usual perspective of analysis is reversed. Citizens are not asked what they think of politicians, but politicians are asked what they think citizens think of them. After some short notes on the research process, the chapter overviews the respondents' definition of political trust as a result of personal judgements of trustworthiness, and then focus on their assessment of the state of political trust in Italy. On this basis, the authors outline a typology of the prevailing attitudes among the politicians and civil servants interviewed regarding the trend in political trust and its possible causes. This enables the authors

2. Information available at the following webpage: www.truedem.eu/resources-and-deliverables/online-survey-2025. Retrieved on 9 October, 2025.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

to show some differences among the interviewees, seemingly stemming from their respective positions within the power structure. A final aspect examined in this chapter refers to the ideas of the politicians and officials interviewed regarding democratic innovations – institutional mechanisms and new technologies – as a strategy for reactivating citizens' political participation.

The second chapter, by Valentina D'Auria and Jessica Maglio, analyses some of the results of research carried out on leaders of civil society organisations, considered to be the main stakeholders in representative democracy. This chapter also begins with a brief methodological note on the research process associated to this target group, followed by an analysis of the interviewees' opinions on the idea of trust and the state of political trust in Italy. This leads to the development of a typology of the prevailing attitudes among the interviewees, which highlights some differences within this group of respondents, also attributable to their degree of proximity to the power structure. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the opinions gathered on the role of democratic innovations in the relationship between citizens and Italian politics.

The third chapter, by Laurie Beaudonnet and Florent Guntz, presents the results of the focus groups discussions among various groups of citizens in the Salerno area. After a brief overview of the research process, the chapter discusses three features of our research findings. First, in the Italian focus groups, participants express a sense of distance from political institutions and actors. This distance is evident both geographically and symbolically, as well as in citizens' practices and attitudes. Second, this observation leads to a broader reflection on trust in institutions and political leaders. The authors explore generational differences in levels of trust, as well as the concrete ways in which this lack of trust is articulated in participants' discussions. Finally, the authors note that the Italian focus groups strongly emphasise the idea that it is primarily individual citizens who must take action. This is particularly interesting because it does not simply appear as a consequence of declining trust in the State, but rather as part of a broader process of individualisation of responsibility, where the burden of action lies with citizens rather than institutions.

In the fourth chapter, Domenico Maddaloni and Domenico Fruncillo explore the role of technocracy in democratic processes in Italy today. The topic lies at the intersection between the TRUEDEM research and two national-interest research projects we are working on, one on the impact of special administrations on political citizenship and the other on the democratic participation of citizens in southern Italy. The authors review the opinions of politicians, representatives of civil society organisations, and

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

citizens on the subject, comparing them and highlighting the ambivalent nature of the relationship between technocracy and democracy today. The expertise of technicians and experts should be welcomed, but it must be placed within the framework of a process in which decisions are made by the electorate, its stakeholders, and its elected representatives.

The fifth chapter, by Angela Delli Paoli, presents some findings from the TRUEDEM quantitative online survey that relate to the Italian case. Following an overview of the survey methodology, the author examine both the levels of trust reported by respondents, particularly in relation to political institutions, and their definitions of politicians' trustworthiness. Additionally, a comparison with results from similar studies, notably the recent Eurobarometer survey, allows to underscore both the potential of this research and its limitations. A last step concerns a multivariate analysis on the relationship between the respondents' levels of political trust and their definition of trustworthiness, controlling for various socio-economic and socio-demographic variables.

Finally, Domenico Fruncillo and Domenico Maddaloni offer some concluding remarks, highlighting in particular the opportunity to incorporate the approach followed by the TRUEDEM research, based, as we have seen, on the principal-agent model and ultimately on rational choice theory, into a neo-institutionalist perspective of political research. The qualitative and quantitative surveys we conducted certainly advance our knowledge of the relationship between citizens, institutions, and political actors in this era of crisis, which appears fraught with change. However, as Norris herself points out, it is important to remember that political change is, to some extent, always dependent on the path taken, even in post-modern European democratic regimes.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

1. *The agent's perspective: a qualitative survey of Italian politicians and civil servants*

by Marialaura Ammirato, Valentina D'Auria
and Domenico Maddaloni*

The study of elites, particularly political elites (or the political class), has a long tradition in the social and political sciences. According to Gallino's *Dizionario di Sociologia*, research on political elites oscillates between two poles, which identify two different conceptions of this social layer. Those who consider elites in terms of power, from Mosca to Wright Mills, study «how the institutional mechanisms that should ensure a certain degree of democracy or popular sovereignty are emptied of meaning and effectiveness by the inclusion at the top of the institution of groups that exercise de facto uncontrolled and irresponsible power» (Gallino, 2004: 278). On the contrary, those who consider elites in terms of function, from Mannheim to Lasswell and Kaplan, study «the conditions most conducive to the formation and selection of elites favourable [to democracy] and the relationships they should establish with the masses» (ibid.).

The TRUEDEM research takes this second perspective. Specifically, it aims to investigate the current views of politicians and public officials in Italy on the relationship between the political system and civil society. As in the TRUEDEM research, the survey focuses on prevailing conceptions of political trust and the trustworthiness of political actors and institutions. The survey also explores how elites form opinions on citizens' attitudes towards them and what they do (or should do) to restore communication and trust and improve the quality of representative democracy.

As mentioned in the Introduction, in this volume we will examine only part of the collected data. After a short description of the research process on this target group, we will therefore limit ourselves to considering the

* Marialaura Ammirato is the author of paragraph 1.4, Valentina D'Auria is the author of paragraph 1.1, and Domenico Maddaloni is the author of paragraphs 1.2 and 1.3. The introduction and concluding remarks are the result of a joint effort.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

ideas of politicians and officials on the nature of political trust. Next, we will focus on the respondents' opinions regarding the state and trends of political trust in Italy today. On this basis, we will present a typology of the prevailing opinions among respondents, together with some reflections on the possible causes that lead political actors to hold these same opinions. Finally, we will present the interviewees' ideas on democratic innovations (Elstub and Escobar, 2019; see also Gonthier, Aymé and Belot, 2024) as a possible strategy to reactivate citizens' engagement. It is widely believed that participatory and deliberative mechanisms could help improve the difficult interaction between public opinion and political elites, both at a local level and in broader political communities: but how widespread is this view among politicians and officials?

1.1. The research process: surveying politicians and public officials

Following the instructions of the TRUEDEM research consortium and receiving approval from the University of Salerno Ethics Committee, we conducted interviews with Italian politicians and civil servants between March and July 2024. The TRUEDEM working group on qualitative research had established a sampling plan aimed at interviewing members of the political elite in European countries at different levels of institutional competence, seeking to ensure representation of different political affiliations and an equal proportion of interviews according to gender and age. The aim was to obtain the widest possible range of information and opinions on the relationship between politics and civil society in European countries, with a relatively limited number of interviews with actors who, as mentioned in the Introduction, serve both as key informants and as the subject of the investigation. The qualitative research group defined the sampling plan in Tab. 1.1, which also outlines the achievements of our research unit.

In qualitative research, it is widely recognised that the sampling plan cannot be based on statistical criteria but on theoretical criteria, which, according to Strauss, are «a means whereby the analyst decides on analytic grounds what data to collect next and where to find them. The basic question in theoretical sampling is: What groups or subgroups of populations, events, activities (to find varying dimensions, strategies, etc.), does one turn to next in data collection? And for what theoretical purpose? So this process of data collection is controlled by the emerging theory» (Strauss, 1987: 38-39). According to this principle, both the sampling process and data collection can be considered as completed when the point of theoreti-

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

cal saturation has been reached: «Saturation means that no additional data are being found whereby the sociologist can develop properties of the category» (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 61).

Tab. 1.1 - Interviews with politicians and civil servants

Sampling plan and data collected

Cluster	Level	Plan	Coll.
Elected representatives of legislative bodies	Local National European	1 2 1	2 4 1
Representatives of executive bodies	Local National European	2 2 1	4 1 1
Public officials	Local National	1 2	1 2
Party officials	Local National	1 2	1 2
Total		15	19
Of which: women			7
Up to 44 years old From 45 to 59 years old 60 years old and more			6 8 5

Source: TRUEDEM qualitative research

In this circumstance, the number of interviews required to complete the initial programme was predetermined in the TRUEDEM research project framework, and even though we exceeded that limit, we cannot be sure that a saturation level has been achieved. Given this limitation of our research, we warn the reader that the results presented are to be intended as preliminary and require further corroboration. Nevertheless, as noted in the Introduction, having inaccurate or incomplete information is always better than having no information at all.

A final remark regarding quotations from interviews. In qualitative research, quotations play an essential role because they illustrate the opinions and attitudes of the subjects involved in the research, provided that their anonymity is respected. For this reason, we decided to identify the speakers with a simple label indicating (1) a generic number of the interview (from 1 to 19), (2) sex (M or F), (3) age group (young, middle-aged, or

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

elderly), and (4) the institutional position of each interviewee. For the latter purpose, we distinguished only between (a) civil servants, (b) national or European (macro-level) politicians, (c) regional or local (micro-level) politicians, and (d) party officials.

1.2. Politicians' perspectives on trust and trustworthiness

There is already a survey-based comparative literature on how elected elites in OECD democracies conceive representation and responsiveness toward their constituents. Empirical research on policymakers' perspectives highlighted how institutional rules (particularly electoral rules) structure politicians' behaviour and their perceived personal incentives (see, for instance, Albanese, Cioffi and Tommasino, 2017; Gulino, 2021). More recent work has focused more directly on how elites themselves conceptualise representation (delegate vs. trustee, party vs. electorate), and how these conceptions vary according to personality, ideology, and party affiliation (Sudulich, Trumm and Bridgewater, 2020; Mongrain, Junius and Brack, 2024). Furthermore, the field of research has shifted from macro congruence to micro mechanisms of responsiveness: how elites form their beliefs about "what citizens want", how accurate those beliefs are, and when they modify their behaviour considering perceived public priorities (Sevenans, Sootjens and Walgrave, 2021; Walgrave et al., 2022).

Let's start with the definitions of trust currently used by the politicians and officials we interviewed. Some, particularly civil servants, believe that political trust transcends personal sympathy. It is a structural and cumulative element of institutional legitimacy and therefore a necessary condition for democratic participation and societal cohesion:

> The trust of citizens is fundamental. It serves to maintain cohesion and a sense of community that justifies the Republic, the State, and its institutions. (Pol03, M, middle-aged, civil servant)

> The trust of citizens is an essential component for the political stability of a system; therefore, it is not simply an emotional issue, it is not simply a feeling that one can have, it is a response that is built up over time, so that trust that becomes political capital is fundamentally institutional in nature. (Pol07, M, young, civil servant)

Other respondents, especially those actively involved in party politics (as distinct from administrative or consultive roles), tend to have a different, less abstract idea of trust. «Comparative studies reveal significant

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

differences between how political elites describe their role: as "delegates" (whose role is to translate citizens' preferences into public policy as faithfully as possible) or as "trustees" (whose role is to seek voters' consent for their own political vision or that of their party)» (Bellucci, 2024: 157-158). For some respondents, therefore, trust is the ability of representatives to listen to and translate citizens' demands into concrete choices, guided by ethics and a sense of duty:

> Obviously, citizens' trust consists in the possibility for citizens to make themselves heard, to bring their demands, and then see them translated into political choices that in some way can respond to their questions. Trust, I believe, also means seeing in one's political representatives virtuous models or, in any case, positive examples on an ethical and moral level. (Pol04, F, young, party officer)

Therefore, there are still politicians who conceive of their relationship with citizens and voters in terms of delegation. This delegation is given more to the party and the core of interests and values it represents than to the individual politician. Research on parliamentary candidates has shown that the ideological proximity to one's party may explain this result, especially with reference to militants' parties and their collocation in the political arena on the opposition side (Sudulich, Trumm and Bridgewater, 2020; Mongrain, Junius and Brack, 2024). On the other side, other politicians view trust as an emotional dimension of an interpersonal relationship between politicians and voters or citizens.

> The trust of citizens is the creation of a transfer relationship between those who elect us and those who are elected, and therefore of continuous communication. […] And it is absolutely [important], because without consent you get nowhere. So if you don't… if the message you convey doesn't get across, the voter will vote for you once, but they won't vote the same way twice. So you have to build voter loyalty, according to the programme that a politician wants to carry out in their work. (Pol19, F, middle-aged, macro-level politician)

According to the politicians we interviewed, trust as a quality of the relationship between rulers and ruled is not distributed evenly across all institutional levels. Both macro-level and micro-level politicians perceive local administrations as more visible and accessible interlocutors than national or European institutions. Local institutions' physical and symbolic proximity allows citizens to have a direct and personal experience that can generate trust (Norris, 2022). Therefore, the distance attributed to central or supranational institutions is seen as a barrier that is difficult to overcome. It is noteworthy that this perception is confirmed by the results of

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

empirical cross-national studies (OECD, 2024). Local governments generally inspire more trust than national/supranational ones.

> But overall, I believe that, regardless of their trust in the mayor, citizens place greater confidence in the institution they see as closest to them, in the sense that they see it as capable of doing something. I don't know the latest figures, but I believe that municipalities are the agencies with the greatest credibility! Then again, no mayor is perfect. Some are challenged even after their first month in the office, because, if anything, they talk… But essentially, they are the ONLY ones who do something that citizens can see immediately. (Pol17, M, young, macro-level politician)

> Local institutions are those that fortunately still represent a more direct interface. So citizens still turn to the Mayor, the City Councillor… So compared to the State or the Region, local institutions and local authorities […] represent a significant point of contact with citizens. (Pol11, F, elderly, micro-level politician)

A topic that was widely debated by respondents was the relationship between citizens' trust in institutions and political actors and the reliability of these institutions and actors. It is widely recognised that this relationship plays a central role in shaping the more general relationship between politics and civil society.

> It is not the citizen who is called upon to trust; it is politics that must work well. Therefore, when citizens are confronted with a political system that is decent, good, transparent, honest and close to them, it is normal for them to trust. (Pol08, F, young, micro-level politician)

What are the qualities of a trustworthy politician? Respondents' opinions on this subject vary widely. One aspect often cited in the literature is transparency in behaviour, as a necessary condition for politicians' accountability. From this perspective, it is important to note that transparency can be the result of an institutional framework that allows for it (in this case we can also talk of "transparency mechanisms"). At the same time, it can be a personal quality of a political actor, which contributes to defining their personal integrity (Norris, 2022: 169-197). However, transparency is a two-way process. On the one hand, it implies that communication flows from civil society to politics. Building trust requires active listening and direct contact with citizens, even when responding negatively to their requests. In such cases, respondents also associate transparency of behaviour with honesty, understood as "intellectual honesty", i.e. a commitment to always tell the truth to voters and citizens.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

The first thing is the truth. Politicians must not lie; they must not make promises at any stage of their political career […]. Therefore (it is important) to tell citizens the truth, even when things are going badly, to say "I can't do this" […]; it's better to give citizens a negative answer than a false positive answer. The second thing is to listen. Anyone can come into my office; I talk to citizens, and I listen to them. Surely, I don't know the citizens who come to me, but I allow them to talk to me when they want and how they want, and then, of course, I evaluate their requests, right? If they are requests that can be accepted […], but listening is essential, citizens need to feel that the institutions are close to them, and it always starts with listening. (Pol08, F, young, micro-level politician)

On the other hand, transparency means that citizens can be informed about the conduct of politicians and public officials in the performance of their duties.

People are right to demand ever greater transparency. However, we sometimes take certain things for granted because they are technical details. But people also want to know about those things. (Pol11, F, elderly, micro-level politician)

It is important to note that, according to some interviewees, transparency is a requirement not only of administrative processes but also extends to the decision-making processes that take place in political bodies.

We have always advocated for greater transparency; we have always advocated for greater participation. We have proposed, for example, that parliamentary committee meetings be open to the public and streamed live so that citizens can at least listen to them either live or afterwards by accessing the recordings in a digital library, and this applies both to parliamentary committee meetings and to negotiation meetings, because those are also important. (Pol13, F, young, macro-level politician)

In this perspective, transparency includes the possibility of being informed about the various aspects of the entire political and administrative process. The lack of trust in institutions and actors at the macro level (Region, State, European Union) is attributed to their distance from citizens' daily lives, leading to a lack of information and transparency.

I believe that citizens trust the institutions they see in their local area enough […]. Obviously, when it comes to politics, in my opinion, trust is greatly reduced, even in the institutions themselves. (Pol04, F, young, party officer)

Another aspect of integrity as a measure of politicians' trustworthiness is individual honesty. In this case, we are not referring to "intellectual

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

honesty" but a commitment to performing public duties impartially and free from private influences. As is well known, the debate on this issue has been very intense in Italy, from the "moral question" promoted by the Communist Party in the 1980s to the "Clean Hands" judicial investigation in the 1990s (Della Porta and Vannucci, 2021). Recently, some political parties and movements have promoted various anti-corruption initiatives and presented themselves as champions of honesty and factors in the moralisation of political life. It is therefore not surprising that this issue is dismissed or considered irrelevant by politicians close to the governing coalition and instead regarded as fundamental to the vitality of democracy by opposition politicians and civil servants.

> Today, we discover that the idea of honesty, which for us is a prerequisite that belongs to man […], is a fake slogan because not only… Even the gradual nature of honesty would be debatable, because there is always someone who has to understand how incorruptible they can be about the facts of life. (Pol16, M, middle-aged, macro-level politician)

> Frankly, currently, I do not believe that politics is a valid option for those who have something to lose. In summary, citizens are no longer able to distinguish between honest and dishonest politicians, or between those who are fair and those who are not. So, at this moment in time, I believe that engaging in politics, especially at the local level, is unfortunately not… no longer viable at this moment in time, at this stage in history. (Pol01, M, middle-aged civil servant)

A third dimension of political trustworthiness is consistency, or the ability to follow a single course of action before and after elections. In turn, this dimension can be broken down into two further aspects. The first concerns loyalty to the political line of the party for which the politician stood for election. On this point, it is worth noting that, according to a recent survey on the Italian political class, «46% of respondents believe that "public reaction" to the decision and 44% indicate that "consistency with the party's principles and platform" are the two most important factors» in determining the outcome of a political decision (Isernia and Martini, 2024: 87).

> Perhaps election manifestos have become almost useless for some parties. For (my political party), however, they are fundamental because we won the votes and trust of the electorate precisely on the basis of that manifesto. (Pol06, M, young, party officer)

The second refers to the specific content of political action – for example, the positions taken on economic and social policy. In this regard, it

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

is worth remembering that the Italian Constitution clearly states that, once elected, members of parliament exercise their powers "without constraints of mandate". In other words, it allows them to adapt their political action to changing circumstances. However, the disappearance of mass parties with strong ideological content and a clear organisational structure in the context of post-democracy (Crouch, 2004) has led to a growing gap between the positions taken by parties and candidates in election campaigns and the political practice observed after the election period. Consistency has therefore become a much-discussed issue – especially among opposition politicians.

> Believing in something […], accepting a cause as the fundamental object of one's actions, not one's own vanity or self-affirmation! And then, perseverance, foresight, tenacity, the ability to hold on even when everything seems lost, and when it would seem more convenient to take another position. (Pol05, M, middle-aged, party officer)

> Just today I was told the story of a former (politician) who was elected… I mean, in the last five years, since he left [his party], he has changed six parties! I'm talking about [politicians from this party], but we could talk about others. Well, I mean, what kind of politician are you? (Pol17, M, young, macro-level politician

> Very often, politics has been built too much on promises and too little on real achievements. So then the promises, in reality, hook you once, hook you twice, hook you three times, but then in the end you realise that the whole election campaign was built on something unachievable, something that was not concrete, and that immediately after the vote it was disregarded. (Pol11, F, elderly, micro-level politician)

According to respondents, a further important factor used by citizens in assessing the reliability of politicians is competence or managerial ability (Norris, 2022: 136-168). Many politicians and civil servants we interviewed agree that trust is not something that citizens can demand but rather a result that institutions and political actors can achieve if they demonstrate their ability to solve problems.

> The first thing is that you have to know how to manage situations. So managerial skills are what people ultimately demand more than anything else. (Pol07, M, middle-aged, civil servant)

> It is not citizens who are called upon to have trust; it is politicians who must work well. (Pol08, F, young, micro-level politician)

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Citizens trust [politics] because they see concrete results. (Pol06, M, young, party officer)

In this circumstance, too, the institution's distance from (or proximity to) the citizen is sometimes considered a factor that can either promote or hinder the building of trust.

I think that the further away you are physically and logistically from citizens, the more difficult it is to communicate the work that is carried out in institutions daily and therefore the results that are achieved, and the more difficult it is to exercise a kind of control […] over the work of elected representatives within institutions. (Pol13, F, young, macro-level politician)

Some interviewees recognise that a lack of skills, or unsuitability for political office, can generate conflicts and problems, even on a personal level.

[In the Covid era] many have completely lost their minds, but seriously, especially the mayors. That is, the mayors who managed Covid have, how can I put it, had a decline in lucidity that still occurs today […]. A mayor at that stage, in a situation where no one knew what to do, so he didn't have the answer, found himself overwhelmed by these demands, and this generated psychological problems. (Pol14, M, young, micro-level politician)

An aspect sometimes associated with competence is the seriousness of behaviour, understood in terms of discipline and dedication to political work. Some empirical evidence supports this view among respondents. In particular, research has shown that party loyalty and the level of activity in the national Parliament influence the likelihood of re-election and appointment to higher political offices (Schobess and de Vet, 2022). This theme is mainly found in interviews with more mature interlocutors, regardless of their political affiliation.

Seriousness and competence are the principles. (Pol16, M, middle-aged, macro-level politician)

Politics is also a competence, of course, according to the ancients, and it is also the highest part of a platform of competences. (Pol15, M, elderly, micro-level politician)

Some older interviewees, however, point out that with the disappearance of organised mass parties, the *cursus honorum*, which allowed the

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

abilities of political actors to be assessed as they progressed in their careers, has also disappeared. The underlying argument is that this can create problems due to the inexperience of those called upon to hold a political office.

> Once upon a time, a *cursus* was a *cursus*… a very long and complicated one! That is, the selection of senior officers was very rigorous and very strong. [I worked at the party for a long time]. Then, at a certain point, I entered the institutions. And so it was for hundreds or thousands of officers. But as time went by… it no longer worked. (Pol15, M, elderly, micro-level politician)

However, for some respondents, it is also true that entrusting political decisions to so-called "technocrats", who by definition are competence bearers in their field, is not always well received. For some, the excessive delegation of power to technicians and experts has stripped politics of its prerogatives, making decisions seem inevitable and uncontested. While such an arrangement may improve the quality of decisions (and their implementation), it can also undermine the legitimacy of political actors in the eyes of citizens.

> I was saying this to some friends earlier: what's the point of being mayor today? Does it allow me to do this? Except for political direction, today everything is in the hands of the (administrative) areas, of the area managers! (Pol09, M, elderly, micro-level politician)

> Bureaucrats are there to… not to make decisions in place of politicians, but to inform politicians. (Pol16, M, middle-aged, macro-level politician)

Moreover, in some cases, the "technical" solutions have not only failed to solve the problems, but have even exacerbated them.

> [In the recent past, many thought that] the more the decision-making level was shifted towards technicians, who ensured the supposed objectivity of the decision, the better! The problem is that today, it is precisely the most authoritative priests of that phase who explain to us that many of those recipes have proved to be wrong. (Pol05, M, middle-aged, party officer)

1.3. State and dynamics of trust in Italy

Let us now consider the views of politicians and civil servants on the state and recent trends of political trust in Italy. We have already encountered some opinions on these issues in the previous pages, discussing the

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

characteristics of the relationship of trust between citizens (or voters) and institutions or political actors. In fact, several respondents describe this relationship as being in crisis, weakened by the inconsistency between politicians' programmes and statements on the one hand and their decisions and behaviour once the election campaign is over on the other (see above, section 1.2). It is easy to see in this discrepancy between promises and results the gap between the expectations raised in voters and the achievements obtained through public policies. This also highlights the spread of a non-merely procedural idea of democracy – a method that ensures public choice is seen also as a means of satisfying social needs and demands (Bobbio, Matteucci and Pasquino, 2006 (1): 513-515). This growing lack, or weakness, of political trust is seen as the cause of rising dissatisfaction with politics, which drives the electorate to seek new solutions in changes of political majority or to withdraw into abstention.

[The state of trust in our country is] low. Low. I experience it every day. Citizens feel lost, they don't feel welcome, and they don't feel listened to. The abstentionism we have in Italy clearly reveals this critical issue; there is no trust in political institutions. (Pol08, F, young, micro-level politician)

Today's abstentionism is not like that of the past! It is not indifference. That is, today's abstentionism… is not the old, classic indifference… and separation from the democratic process. Today's abstentionism is a political choice… It is taking a stand against. It is not a choice; it is saying, "we are against". Why? Because there is a LACK of trust! In politics, in political parties. (Pol15, M, elderly, micro-level politician)

The largest party is abstentionism. This could simply be mistrust or perhaps clear reasoning on the part of those who have clearly perceived that there is no real representation. (Pol18, F, elderly, macro-level politician)

What are the causes of this crisis of confidence in politics? According to some respondents, the main factor is the decline in the ethical standards of the political class. Again, this decline is particularly evident in the growing gap between election promises and actual achievements.

(Political trust is) in crisis because there are so many inconsistencies with regard to electoral programmes, which leaves citizens feeling disoriented. During the election campaign, they read the programs and commitments and vote based on them. Then, over the years, they realise that the representatives they had trusted are taking a different path, intending to achieve other goals that do not converge with those they had presented. All this certainly undermines citizens' trust in institutions and their representatives. (Pol13, F, young, macro-level politician)

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Other respondents, however, refer mainly to causes external to the political representatives' nature and characteristics. Some, for instance, attribute the challenging relationship between citizens and politics to the increasing complexity of electoral systems. It is worth remembering that Italy has a different voting system for each type of election.

The state [of political trust in Italy] is very poor, the perception of trust in politics is very low, but I believe that the key to understanding this is the electoral method […]. We see this in the European elections. For example, we have candidates who physically telephone citizens to ask for their vote. This creates a relationship of trust, that is, the candidate I vote for will be my candidate […]. They may win, they may lose their election campaign, OK, but afterwards a relationship of trust will develop between the citizen and the elected representative. In the case of the Italian electoral system for Parliament, however, this not only does not exist, but is discouraged by the electoral system, because when I vote by putting an X on a symbol, then, to whom will the people who will be elected have a moral obligation to represent? To the party, no longer to the citizen. In my opinion, this is where the short circuit lies, because we have ended up with a leader-cracy. (Pol14, M, young, micro-level politician)

This weak or lacking trust can also affect policy implementation. Among the civil servants we interviewed, some pointed out that regulatory confusion affects the relationship between citizens and public institutions.

What I perceive is a dislike of the bureaucratic apparatus! As far as my role in particular is concerned, I would say, with a degree of self-criticism, that most of the problems of [the institution I work for] indeed stem from the lack of clarity of the rules. (Pol02, M, middle-aged, civil servant)

However, sometimes citizens' lack of trust in politicians is largely reciprocated. As Isernia and Martini observe, among many Italian politicians «the judgement on public opinion is not flattering, with a "moody" and unstable view of the public prevailing» (2024: 96). Recent research on local politicians provides further confirmation of this attitude (Hosteins, 2025).

Nowadays, it is impossible to form a correct opinion because the problem is that we have a very high percentage of functional illiteracy. As a result, citizens are unable to… They are bombarded with a thousand pieces of information and are unable to discern between the various sources or to understand when a news item is true or false. (Pol01, M, middle-aged, civil servant)

More than voters, we have become fans. (Pol14, M, young, micro-level politician)

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

The difficult relationship between citizens and political representatives can be attributed also to misinformation or the poor education or culture of citizens themselves. According to some, a distracted and poorly informed public is unable to form adequate judgements about the quality of public policies.

[In a wealthy neighbourhood], when asked, "What is differentiated autonomy?", a lady replied, "We have achieved a good percentage". So they confused it with separate waste collection, which is terrible! (Pol10, F, middle-aged, micro-level politician)

A primary reform should focus on investing in public education, that is, to have citizens with a minimum of cultural background and critical thinking skills, which is also a prerequisite for an informed democracy. (Pol05, M, middle-aged, party officer)

There is no political culture. (Pol18, F, elderly, macro-level politician)

Other respondents, however, do not share this view of the state of political trust in Italy. According to them, political trust is currently recovering. The end of the "technical" government and the return to a party government have fostered a resurgence of trust between the public and the political class.

I think that compared to the past, (the level of trust) has increased, partly thanks to [our party leader] because she was elected and won such a large percentage of the vote precisely because of her consistency, which was appreciated by the public, a consistency that is rarely seen in politics these days. [The party leader] has managed to maintain this consistency over time […] by always sticking to her ideas, and the citizens have so much appreciated this that today, after almost two years of government, the percentages of [the ruling party] are still high and maintain the level that was given by the great confidence shown by the citizens in the general election. (Pol06, M, young, party officer)

Others note that a possible improvement in relations between citizens and politics in Italy stems from an overall improvement in the institutional system and the general quality of political personnel. This is a minority opinion, but some public officials support it.

I believe that a dangerous tendency to disqualify anything related to public institutions, power, or the so-called Establishment […] has gained ground in Italian public opinion. In essence, we now have a much better system than we had in many sectors, which is undoubtedly the case in politics. In my opinion,

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Italian politics today is much more transparent than it was in the past; there is much more expertise than there was in the past; our politicians have much greater responsibility than in the past; they have a capacity for dialogue and a certain enviable stability when compared to other countries. (Pol07, M, middle-aged, civil servant)

Therefore, there is no doubt that the prevailing opinion regarding the state of political trust in Italy is largely negative among the civil servants and members of the political elite. Nevertheless, as we have seen before, there are exceptions to this rule. We have constructed a typology (Marradi, 1992; Marradi and Rodolfi, 1999) in order to better appreciate these differences of opinion. The typology considers as *fundamenta divisionis* (1) the opinion of respondents on the current trends in trust, whether it is rising or declining, and (2) the opinion of respondents on the causes of this dynamic, whether endogenous (related to the political class) or exogenous (related to organisational or technological aspects or inherent in the general change in society or culture) (see Fig. 1.1).

These results deserve some further consideration. In a largely post-democratic (Crouch, 2004) and self-referential (Mair, 2013) institutional context, politicians and policymakers fail to see things *as things truly are* (that is, from the point of view of people who do not live on politics). On the contrary, politicians see things *as politicians themselves are* (from the perspective of their experiences, the relationships they have forged, and their personal position with respect to the centres of power). This research result is consistent with what we can infer from the thinking of the classics of social science – from Marx (2024) to Durkheim (2016) – on the relationship between social being and individual consciousness. Similarly, it is consistent with what can be gleaned from the concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 2003) as a system of internalised patterns of thought, perception and action acquired through social experience that unconsciously guide personal choices and behaviours (Hosteins, 2025). Therefore, the decline of political trust is seen as a problem only by politicians who are far from these power centres but not by those who are close to them. Among the factors of proximity to/distance from the centre of (national) power, the following can be noted: (1) the membership of a governing or opposition party (to the national government); (2) the national or local level of activity.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Fig. 1.1 - Evolution of political trust in Italy

Politicians' and officers' perspectives

		Evolution of trust	
		Growth	***Decline***
Causes of change	***Endogenous***	Quality of the current ruling élite	Quality of the political class as a whole
	Exogenous	Cultural, technological or institutional improvements	Cultural, technological or institutional shortcomings

Source: TRUEDEM research

On the other hand, the gender or age of respondents does not appear to significantly influence this differences in attitudes. In this situation, it is difficult to imagine that the drive to renew democratic institutions and procedures could come from within the party system, the political class or the ruling elite.

1.4. Democratic innovations: a view from above

A recent survey on the opinions and attitudes of Italian politicians found that «the fact that politicians assert their role and disregard public opinion may help explain why they view the role that deliberative and participatory democracy can play in restoring the bond of trust between citizens and institutions with extreme mistrust and scepticism» (Isernia and Martini, 2024: 98). In this last section, we will present some research findings that will allow us to verify these statements.

According to some respondents, new forms of deliberative democracy and participatory democracy can foster the renewal of the relationship between public opinion and political institutions. Recent technological innovations can be useful in promoting this development.

In fact, our Constitution also provides for forms of direct democracy, and I sincerely believe that new technologies could effectively open the door to other forms of citizen participation. (Pol07, M, middle-aged, civil servant)

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Some interviewees conflate institutional mechanisms that foster participation with technological tools that enable direct representative-constituent communication, highlighting social media's political significance. The transition of the principal-agent relationship from the institutional to the personal level remains unexplained.

> There is interaction with the public. [Citizens] respond, criticise, make requests, and get information through social media. Many calls for tenders that I launch with the municipality, citizens learn about the call for tenders and therefore have the requirements, perhaps, to participate, not because the act is published in the Municipal Register, as required by law, but because I shared it on social media. (Pol08, F, young, micro-level politician)

Others believe participatory democracy should complement rather than replace representation. These interviewees mainly emphasise the need to rebuild the relationship between the electoral body and the party system.

> I believe that democratic innovations can serve as a complementary tool, but they are not the primary solution. The fundamental solution is to restore the minimum conditions of AUTONOMY to democratic politics, which it currently lacks. In other words, the fundamental solution is to restore the accountability of political decision-makers to their elected constituents, rather than to external power centres. (Pol05, M, middle-aged party officer)

Shifting to a more sceptical view, other respondents share the opinion that the introduction of institutional mechanisms for citizen involvement in public decision-making processes is little more than a form of political window dressing. They contend that the integration of participatory tools into decision-making processes is merely a political ploy to conceal the political elite's choices.

> Participation has merely become an opportunity for citizens to make comments that are probably not even read; it no longer exists, and it has all become bureaucracy. The time allowed for making comments on [procedures for assessing the environmental impact of public works] is being reduced, and the places for participation are being reduced, but it would take very little to change this. Clearly, however, there is a lack of political will. (Pol18, F, elderly, macro-level politician)

In other circumstances, where the stakes are particularly high, such as when deciding whether to undertake major public works with huge investments and a significant environmental impact, the political class may even choose to disregard citizen participation in the decision-making process.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

> Today, there is talk of a bridge over the Strait [of Messina]. Here, we have a section of the political class that has decided to do it and is doing it, full stop, OK? But were citizens asked? Was there a referendum among the people of Calabria and Sicily? Did we ask these citizens if they want this bridge, right or wrong as it may be? I'm not getting into the merits of the political choice, but did we listen to these citizens? (Pol08, F, young, micro-level politician)

We can conclude this brief examination by noting that the politicians and officials we interviewed have rather complex and nuanced opinions on democratic innovations. However, they tend to be sceptical about the effectiveness of these tools as a strategy for reviving citizens' participation. In this sense, our research supports the findings of the quantitative survey on *La classe politica italiana* (Isernia, Martini, and Verzichelli, 2024). We can add that the issues of participatory democracy and deliberative democracy are felt particularly strongly by those in the opposition and those who are closer to the daily lives of the citizens they intend to represent. Apparently, this result corroborates the observations we proposed regarding the typology in the previous section. However, the limited nature of these results prevents us from drawing any broad conclusions.

Concluding remarks

In this chapter, we discussed the opinions of Italian politicians and civil servants on political trust, its recent trends, and the possible paths to democratic renewal. The approach adopted – qualitative, theoretically informed, and sensitive to distinctions between different institutional levels and political positions – allowed us to grasp the complexity of the relationship between elites and citizenry in a democratic context marked by growing disaffection, disillusionment, and institutional distance.

A final remark concerns the plurality of conceptions of "trust" that emerged from the interviews. On the one hand, public officials tend to view it in structural and institutional terms: as political capital accumulated over time, the foundation of democratic legitimacy and social cohesion. On the other hand, many politicians see it in relational and interpersonal terms, linked to the ability to listen, ethical consistency, and loyalty to the electoral mandate. This dichotomy reflects a broader tension between a "functional" view of the elite (which must ensure good governance) and a "representative" view (which must embody citizens' expectations) (Sampugnaro and Montemagno, 2024). This tension is particularly acute in a country such as Italy, where the crisis of mass parties has weakened the traditional mechanisms of political mediation (see the Introduction above).

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

The chapter highlighted how trust is not distributed evenly across different levels of government. Local administrations emerge as places still perceived as "close" and "visible" by citizens, capable of producing tangible results and establishing direct relationships. In contrast, national and supranational institutions are seen as distant, opaque, and rather unaccountable. This perception is consistent with the international literature on institutional proximity as a key factor in building trust (Norris, 2022), but it takes on particular relevance in Italy, given the chronic instability of the central political system (see the Introduction above).

Furthermore, we presented an analysis of the qualities that – according to our respondents – make a politician "trustworthy": transparency, honesty, consistency, and competence. However, it is clear that these virtues are not shared equally. Honesty, for example, is emphasised above all by opposition politicians, while it is relativised by representatives of the parties currently in the national government. Similarly, programmatic consistency is strongly advocated by those who criticise the volatility of parties and the frequent "migration" of parliamentarians and councillors between opposite sides, but it appears to be secondary to those respondents who favour tactical flexibility or governability.

We examined the opinions of politicians and civil servants on recent trends in trust and their causes. While some respondents attribute it to endogenous factors – such as the inconsistency between election promises and government action, or corruption – others attribute it to exogenous factors: the complexity of electoral systems, public misinformation, functional illiteracy, or the increasing bureaucratisation of procedures. This divergence may reflect a kind of "mutual blindness": while citizens see the political class as primarily responsible for the crisis, many politicians tend to shift some of the blame for political failures onto poor civic culture or the irrationality of public opinion. This contrast risks fuelling a vicious circle of mistrust and self-referentiality (Isernia, Martini and Verzichelli, 2024).

Finally, the chapter offers an assessment of democratic innovations: participatory mechanisms, deliberative democracy, and the use of new technologies. Apparently, while some respondents recognise their potential, pragmatic scepticism prevails. These tools are sometimes perceived as formal rituals with no real impact on decision-making processes. This scepticism is particularly marked among macro-level politicians, while those who are closer to citizens show greater openness. In summary, the chapter not only illustrates a critical phase in Italian democracy but also raises a deeper question: in a post-democratic and self-referential context, can the political elite itself be the driving force behind its own renewal?

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

2. *The stakeholders' perspective: CSO leaders on political trust in Italy today*

by Valentina D'Auria and Jessica Maglio*

The intersection between civil society and political trust has been only partially explored in political studies. Research on political and institutional trust has been dominated by analyses at the citizen level (Norris, 2011; Dalton and Welzel, 2014; Warren, 2018), often relying on transnational surveys and focusing on crisis contexts, such as the post-2008 economic recession or the COVID-19 crisis. In contrast, studies from a stakeholders' perspective – which consider how trade unions, employer associations, NGOs, and social movements articulate trust or distrust in politics – remain relatively rare. For example, Bulfone and Afonso (2019) show that employers' organisations in Spain, Italy, and Portugal resisted the liberalisation of collective bargaining during the Eurozone crisis. According to them, stronger agreements and dialogue at the top level in this field indicate greater trust in institutionalised social partnerships when politicians align with shared responsibilities and non-austerity pathways. Similarly, Canalda Criado (2022) focuses on the participation of social partners in managing the COVID-19 crisis (tripartite dialogue) in Italy, Portugal, and Spain. This study shows that resistance to liberalisation reflects reliance on institutional protections of sectoral bargaining and state-supported extensions, signalling trust in such institutions and scepticism towards unilateral policy reforms. While these studies provide context and potential drivers for stakeholders' trust frameworks, they typically do not capture the direct assessments expressed by organisations themselves about political actors or institutions.

* Valentina D'Auria is the author of sections 2.1, 2.3, and 2.4. Jessica Maglio is the author of section 2.2. The introduction and concluding remarks are the result of a joint effort.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

This gap is also evident in the Italian context, where studies on political trust have primarily focused on either citizens or political representatives. However, the role of civil society organisations as stakeholders in the democratic process and bearers of a relevant perspective and attitude towards the relationship between politicians and citizens remains largely overlooked (Moro, 2009; De Blasio and Sorice, 2016). Not surprisingly, research on civic participation and democratic innovation has developed less systematically in Italy than in other European countries. Some studies (Floridia, 2012; De Blasio and Sorice, 2016; Allegretti et al., 2021) have examined local cases of deliberation and participatory budgeting, highlighting the importance of the relational dimension of trust between citizens and institutions. However, as shown by Addeo, Fruncillo, and Maddaloni (2025), Italian civil society organisations currently hold an ambivalent position: on the one hand, they promote participation; on the other, they are witnesses to the crisis of political trust.

Therefore, this chapter takes on particular significance in that the research results we will discuss here, at least in part, fill a gap in the scientific literature on political trust and, more broadly, on the relationship between politics and civil society. As already highlighted above, the wealth of information we have gathered necessitates a selection that will facilitate access to the results of our investigation. The chapter, therefore, opens with a methodological section that outlines the rules we followed during the research. In the following paragraph, we will examine the interviewees' definitions of political trust, particularly their relationship to the concept of trustworthiness. The following section focuses on the respondents' assessment of the state of political trust in Italy and the variables that influence its development. As in the previous chapter, we also offer a typology of attitudes among the leaders of civil society organisations regarding this issue. A final section presents the interviewees' opinions on the possibility of a renewal of the relationship between politics and citizens through democratic innovations. In the conclusive, we discuss possible future developments in research in this field.

2.1. The research process: surveying Italian CSOs representatives

We conducted a campaign of interviews with representatives of civil society organisations between March and July 2024. In this case, too, we followed the sampling plan prepared by the TRUEDEM consortium working group for qualitative research. Table 2.1 presents a comparison between

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

the plan's forecasts and the data collected during the field survey. We carried out 18 interviews instead of the planned 15. The breakdown of respondents by gender shows a slight prevalence of men, but women still make up a third of those interviewed (6 out of 18). On the other hand, there is a perfect balance between the age groups identified by the research (young: up to 44 years of age; middle-aged: 45-59 years old; and senior: 60 years old or more), each of which includes six interviewees.

As required by the rules of the TRUEDEM consortium, we followed the guidelines prepared by the qualitative research working group when conducting the interviews. The guidelines included sets of questions structured around several key themes: (1) The position of the CSO in the political system; (2) Changes in trust, perceptions of trustworthiness, and possible explanations; (3) Democratic innovations and trust building; (4) Information environment and media. The interviews lasted from about half an hour to about an hour and a quarter. From this rich source of information, we will draw findings related to (a) the definitions of trust and its links with the concept of trustworthiness, (b) the state and dynamics of political trust, and (c) democratic innovations as a strategy for reviving trust in the relationship between politicians and civil society.

Tab. 2.1 - Interviews with CSO leaders

Sampling plan and data collected

Cluster	**Level**	**Plan**	**Coll.**
Economic organisations (Business associations, Trade unions)	National European	3 2	3 4
Grassroots organisations and Social movements	Local National	3 2	3 2
Human rights and Democracy organisations	Local National International	2 2 1	3 2 1
Total		15	18
Of which: women			6
Up to 44 years old From 45 to 59 years old 60 years old and more			6 6 6

Source: TRUEDEM qualitative research

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

To ensure respondents' anonymity, excerpts from interviews cited in the following text are accompanied by a code. This code indicates, in order, (1) an interview identification number, (2) the gender of the respondent (male or female), (3) the age group (see above), (4) the respondent's level of action, whether local or regional ("micro-level") or national or European ("macro-level"), and finally (5) whether the organisation is economic (a trade union or business association) or non-economic in nature.

2.2. Defining trust and political trustworthiness

In contemporary Italy, civil society organisations offer a privileged vantage point for analysing the meaning of political trust. Unlike individual citizens, they act as collective actors, structured and endowed with missions, resources, and specific responsibilities. Their relationship with institutions takes shape through advocacy practices, is sustained through collaboration with public administrations, and is tested daily in co-planning, service delivery, participation in decision-making arenas, and civic monitoring activities. As a result, their definition of political trust is not limited to an attitude or a perception; it also concerns the relational and operational dimensions of democratic functioning.

In international literature, political trust is generally understood as a judgement about institutions based on perceptions of integrity, competence, and the responsibility of public actors (Norris, 2011; Dalton and Welzel, 2014; Warren, 2018). However, most of these studies focus on the individual level – that is, the citizen (Sani and Segatti, 2001) or the politician (Best and Cotta, 2000) – while paying less attention to the perspective of collective actors and to the criteria they use to evaluate political trustworthiness. In Italy, research has concentrated mainly on the role of civic organisations in participatory and deliberative processes (Moro, 2009; De Blasio and Sorice, 2016; Floridia, 2012; Allegretti et al., 2021), while a systematic analysis of their conceptions of trust and of the conditions they associate with a trustworthy relationship with politics is less developed. As also highlighted by Addeo, Fruncillo and Maddaloni (2025), CSOs operate as central bridging actors within the democratic infrastructure, capable of shaping and mediating the dynamics of trust and distrust between citizens and institutions.

In this context, investigating how civil society representatives characterise trust and political trustworthiness entails analysing the relational foundations of trust and the criteria that render public action credible. This section analyses the definitions of trust that emerge from the interviews,

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

focusing on the criteria by which CSOs assess the trustworthiness of political actors – a perspective that enables a deeper understanding of today's dynamics of legitimacy and delegitimization.

The interviews show that organisations articulate trust along three main dimensions:

1. a relational dimension, grounded in proximity, listening, and continuity in the relationship;
2. an organisational dimension that links trust to credibility, independence, and coherence in public action;
3. a systemic dimension, which interprets trust as a necessary condition for democratic cooperation between institutions and organised civic actors.

These three aspects stem from how CSOs experience and interpret their everyday role within public governance. As emphasised by Italian studies on the third sector and participatory processes (Bobbio, 2007; Floridia, 2017; De Blasio and Sorice, 2018), these organisations do not merely interact episodically with politics. Rather, they operate as civic infrastructures that mediate needs, build relationships, and make democratic processes workable (Della Porta, 2011).

A first definitional core concerns the interpersonal dimension. For many CSO leaders, trusting someone means being able to rely on a relationship grounded in listening and continuous presence. As one interviewee stated:

> The concept of trust is very important, which first of all means… creating a moment in which there is an individualisation, an atomisation of the relationship. When the only contact is the web or the mobile phone, having organisations, offices – not only political ones but also social partners – that can offer continuous assistance to people is, I believe, very important. And trust is also nourished by the relationship that is created with the person who is listening. In short, trust is nourished by listening and, if possible, by the ability to respond to the concrete needs of people! (CSO17, M, senior, macro-level economic organisation)

This idea of trust as a situated, face-to-face relationship aligns with the literature on civic organisations' ability to generate social capital through everyday practices (Cartocci, 2007). Political trust, in this sense, does not stem from institutional abstraction but from concrete experiences of proximity and care. This emerges particularly clearly in educational contexts:

> The children who come to our centres discover a relationship with young people, usually high-school or university students… who take care of their lives! Then the family – especially the mothers – discover interlocutors they

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

can trust… who can give them a hand not only with homework but also in some choices. The child learns to trust an adult who is neither an older brother nor a social worker. Trust… is the key word. (CSO08, M, senior, micro-level non-economic organisation)

Many CSO representatives believe that this relational conception of trust, built through concrete experiences of reciprocity and care, is the first level of a broader fiduciary relationship. Individual trust serves as the starting point for more structured forms of cooperation, in which expectations of public actors become criteria of credibility and institutional responsibility.

A second way in which CSOs define trust concerns the credibility of political or institutional interlocutors. Trust entails recognising authority, independence, and continuity in public actions. As stressed in two interviews:

The fiduciary bond is fundamental for working closely with citizens in their various components, just as authoritativeness is. That is, the fact that independence is an element of authoritativeness! If I am not independent but depend on chains of political influence, of power, of economic interests, my independence casts doubt on my authoritativeness, and this has a lot to do with the trust one manages to earn. (CSO11, F, middle-aged, macro-level non-economic organisation)

I believe that trust – but above all reputation – is a valuable asset for working even with an apolitical institution, demonstrating that you bring arguments that are sensible, coherent, effective, scientifically grounded, and not mere positions taken on principle. (CSO01, M, young, macro-level non-economic organisation)

From the interviewees' words, trust appears as a judgement of another actor's reliability, formed by observing over time their coherence, their autonomy from external pressures, and the quality of the positions they are able to sustain publicly. In this sense, credibility is described as the capacity to maintain an autonomous stance, to articulate arguments coherently, and to present oneself as a reliable interlocutor over the long term. This understanding of trust assigns a central role to observable and assessable behaviours, such as continuity in decision-making, transparency of motivations, and the ability to act with integrity in public contexts (Hardin, 2002; Bouckaert and Van de Walle, 2003):

The position of our trade union organisation is not to hold prejudices against one government as opposed to another. That is, what matters are concrete behaviours – namely, the concrete measures that are adopted on specific issues, for ex-

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

ample employment, which is precisely what we are asking for. (CSO17, M, senior, macro-level economic organisation)

Independence, in particular, emerges as a necessary condition for activating a fiduciary relationship: only an actor perceived as free from political or economic constraints can credibly act in the public interest. Personal reputation is a key element of this credibility. In the excerpt above, it does not coincide with public visibility but with a form of recognition deriving from consolidated practices, the quality of the arguments presented, and the consistency between what is declared and what is actually carried out (Ostrom, 1998; Ostrom and Walker, 2003). For many respondents, trust accumulates over time as the outcome of continuous commitment, expressed both in the transparency of intentions and in the technical and value-based robustness of their proposals.

In the stakeholders' perspective, therefore, political trust takes the form of a judgement on the trustworthiness of public actors, grounded in the continuity of their positions, their ability to preserve autonomy from external pressures, and the credibility they demonstrate in institutional practice. These aspects define trust and shape its stability over time.

Alongside the relational and organisational dimensions, a significant number of CSO leaders interpret trust as a structural quality of the democratic system rather than a feature of individual actors. Seen in this light, trust does not only concern the behaviour of institutional interlocutors; it is also a necessary condition for institutions and civic actors to cooperate within a shared decision-making framework. This view aligns with analyses that describe trust as a public good and as an infrastructure of democratic participation (Norris, 2011; Moro, 2013; Warren, 2018; Pasquino, 2022).

The clearest reference to this level appears in interviews where trust is linked directly to the quality of democratic processes, especially their capacity to involve citizens in meaningful forms of participation. As one interviewee put it:

> Citizen participation is a fundamental requirement for restoring trust. But of course, it must not be an exercise in participation for its own sake […]. Participatory processes are complex and must aim not only at effectiveness but also at re-establishing a relationship of trust. (CSO01, M, young, macro-level non-economic organisation)

Here, trust is a systemic outcome: it arises from how institutions construct inclusive decision-making spaces, provide clear feedback, and ac-

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

knowledge citizens' contributions (Levi and Stoker, 2000; Rothstein and Stolle, 2008). This definition resonates with Italian studies on the crisis of democratic intermediation, particularly in the work of Allegretti (2014) and De Blasio and Sorice (2016), which show that trust grows when participatory processes produce transparent, verifiable, and non-symbolic decisions.

Other excerpts highlight how systemic trust concerns the distance between citizens and institutions, framing it again as a problem of the overall functioning of the political arena rather than of individual actors. As noted in one interview:

> I think that today levels of trust are really low, also shown by the low turnout at elections […]. This is an indirect sign of distrust towards political institutions – not only parties, but also regions and local authorities. (CSO04, M, senior, macro-level non-economic organisation)

This observation defines trust as an indicator of democratic health: electoral participation becomes a proxy of trust in the political system. Consistent with Italian research on the crisis of political representation (Cartocci, 2007; Diamanti, 2014), trust appears here as a collective judgement of the institutions' ability to maintain legitimacy, continuity, and responsiveness.

Finally, some accounts underscore the link between the erosion of trust and the risks of democratic deterioration, showing how distrust takes on a systemic dimension that can affect the balance and quality of the political system as a whole:

> Around this distrust, a populist mechanism begins to emerge, and it is dangerous […], we see an evolution of democracy that is becoming more and more autocratic. And so, in this I sense a danger. (CSO04, M, senior, macro-level non-economic organisation)

Although it is not a strict definition of trust, this excerpt makes clear that, in the experience of CSOs, trust has systemic consequences: its erosion fuels the dynamics of delegitimisation and polarisation that weaken democratic quality. This idea appears widely in Italian and international literature on the "crisis of trust" as a macro-political phenomenon (Norris, 2011; Floridia, 2020).

This systemic dimension frames political trust as a tool or an infrastructure for democratic cooperation – a shared resource that allows institutional, civic, and social actors to recognise one another as legitimate, responsible, and engaged within a common horizon.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

This perspective completes the picture drawn by the other two dimensions, showing how trust has a multilayered nature: it is rooted in shared values, shaped by daily practices, and continuously redefined through the experiences and interactions that characterise public life.

2.3. The state and dynamics of trust in Italy

Civil society organisations offer a close-up perspective on the state of political and institutional trust in Italy. Their intermediary position – rooted in local communities yet constantly engaged with decision-making processes in the public sphere – allows them to carefully observe how trust circulates across different levels of government and which conditions and resources facilitate or hinder its stabilisation. What emerges from the interviews is a complex picture in which political, administrative, and participatory factors shape a fragile and uneven landscape of trust. This interpretation aligns with findings from Italian studies on participation and democratic quality, which have long highlighted the weakening of relations between public institutions and civil society (Cartocci, 2007; Moro, 2009; Floridia, 2020):

> I believe that Italy, too, is currently going through a moment that probably… one of those moments that most clearly brings into focus a condition that has taken shape over time, and that is now explicit – that is, visible and objectively recognisable. We are living through a very clear crisis of democracy, a very clear crisis that did not begin suddenly in Italy, but rather concerns all Western democracies. (CSO18, M, young, macro-level economic organisation)

A group of testimonies points to the impact of public scandals and political events on collective perceptions of reliability:

> I believe that… trust in politics is very low. It's not me saying this, it's various indicators and reports that every year try, among other things, to measure trust and… I think that, on the one hand – though there are of course many reasons – there are certainly the scandals we witness, which only multiply the feeling of distrust towards politics. I also think that, on the other hand, politics does not work to reduce this gap and increasingly treats it as an endemic condition, without really considering a problem that will increasingly undermine the functioning of democracy, democracy itself. (CSO01, M, young, macro-level non-economic organisation)

The perspective conveyed by this testimony highlights a dual dynamic: on the one hand, the structural fragility of the trust relationship, constantly

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

exposed to the impact of scandals and cases of maladministration; on the other hand, the absence of political investment to repair this fracture. Interviewees point to an issue that recurs across several accounts: the idea that the distance between citizens, civic actors, and public decision-makers is not episodic but the result of a systemic weakness that risks affecting the very quality of democracy. What follows is an emblematic excerpt:

> Even this simple analysis gives us an immediate reading of the level of trust, which has collapsed. There is a greater distance, also because, I imagine, political classes no longer correspond to that… that credibility they had earned, even in the early years of the Republic, in the first decades, probably thanks to seriousness, institutional commitment, and also to their level of preparation. There is no doubt that the mechanisms for selecting political candidates no longer pass through a serious process of popular participation – through party branches, the training of ruling elites – but instead operate through mechanisms… which I would even venture to describe as somewhat unusual. […] And this, in turn, leads to a political class that is absolutely unprepared. (CSO12, M, senior, macro-level economic organisation)

Alongside the effects generated by critical events, many CSO representatives underline that trust levels vary considerably across different institutions, revealing distinct configurations along the political system.

> I think that trust in institutions is concentrated around a few institutions. I think of the President of the Republic, the judiciary… certain specific sectors, like the police forces. However, I think that in recent years – I have been interested in politics since I was young – today trust levels are really low, as shown also by the low turnout at elections. (CSO04, M, senior, macro-level non-economic organisation)

Trust thus takes on a selective form, concentrated on institutions perceived as more stable and less exposed to political contention. This uneven distribution is reflected in organisations' daily interactions: some administrations are predictable and reliable, while others struggle to maintain continuity in their relationships and responsibilities. It is within this context that many CSOs extend their evaluation to their concrete experience of working with administrative bodies.

Another element concerns the progressive widening of the distance between citizens, civil society, and public decision-makers. These perceptions intersect with a broader interpretation of the relationship between citizens, civil society, and institutions – one that many organisations describe as increasingly weakened.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

But unfortunately, I must say that the current situation is one of… […] a great lack of trust towards the public administration. It would probably be too long and complex to analyse all the factors that have led to this… […] disconnection, the distancing of citizens… the disaffection of citizens towards the political class. (CSO09, M, young, micro-level non-economic organisation)

As noted above, civil society leaders view this distance as a long-term process, evident in declining participation, a difficult recognition of the effectiveness of public policies, and a perception of a public authority that is often not easily accessible. Within this broader context of growing distance, some testimonies also point to operational dynamics that directly affect CSOs' ability to maintain stable relationships.

Another element concerns the stability of the administrative counterparts with whom CSOs interact. Several interviews highlight the difficulty of building continuous working relationships with public institutions, due to frequent changes in contact persons, internal adjustments, and uncertainty about responsibilities. This organisational instability makes the trust relationship more fragile, because it reduces the predictability of decision-making processes and complicates the identification of who is accountable for the choices made. Institutional distance thus takes on an operational dimension, shaping civic actors' ability to navigate decision-making arenas.

Participation emerges as a particularly salient issue. In many testimonies, CSO leaders describe processes that consume time and energy without producing clear outcomes, putting the trust relationship's resilience to the test. One interview, in particular, stresses the direct link between the quality of participatory processes and trust:

Participatory processes are complex! And they must aim not only at efficiency, at effectiveness, but, in my view, also at restoring a relationship of trust. You do not restore trust when a participatory process leads to nothing. 'To nothing' means not informing people about the outcome of that process. Because participation has costs! (CSO01, M, young, macro-level non-economic organisation)

From this perspective, participation is credible only when it produces recognisable outcomes, provides feedback, and shows at least some coherence between the initial engagement and the final decision. The absence of feedback is perceived as a form of participatory "display" that consumes rather than rebuilds trust capital, in line with Italian scholarship on participatory practices (Allegretti, 2014; De Blasio and Sorice, 2019).

Another interview highlights the same issue from the standpoint of grassroots organisations, stressing the gap between formal recognition and actual influence:

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

> We are part of some planning tables, also at regional level, on European funds, on the ERDF; we have been there for years, with varying results. […] We are often included, we are part of consultative bodies, also with the municipality, so we are there! Yet, a serious implementation of participatory and co-design instruments is something we have not yet encountered. […] There are obstacles. We are always very much in demand – meaning that when we are invited we always contribute […] but we struggle to see our proposals taken up! (CSO07, F, middle-aged, micro-level non-economic organisation)

This "low-yield participation" confirms a risk already highlighted in research on democratic innovations in Italy: consultative processes without verifiable outcomes can reinforce distrust rather than mitigate it, especially when they involve actors who consistently invest resources and expertise in policy processes.

Some respondents see this fragility of participation as part of a broader scenario in which the crisis of trust fuels political dynamics that go beyond the direct relationship between civil society organisations and public bodies.

> Yes, because around this distrust a populist mechanism emerges, and it is dangerous! We can see it even from examples in mature democracies like the United States, like Argentina, with the rise to power of figures such as Trump, such as Milei, etc., who are essentially populists… and who do not represent an actual democratic shift. In many European countries, we see that democracy is evolving in a way that tends to become increasingly autocratic! And so I perceive a danger in this, and I also measure it in relation to many people I meet. (CSO04, M, senior, micro-level non-economic organisation)

This quotation reflects a broader concern shared by many CSO leaders: the erosion of trust not only produces weaker relationships with institutions (as discussed earlier) but also fuels political dynamics that may weaken democratic functioning. Widespread distrust creates space for simplified narratives and increasingly polarised forms of political competition, with consequences for the quality of public debate (Diamanti, 2014).

In light of these findings, the testimonies reveal a complex set of orientations adopted by CSO representatives regarding institutional trust. Although not rigid categories, these orientations outline recurrent patterns that help distinguish different ways of attributing credibility to institutions, assessing the quality of participatory processes, and defining the conditions under which a trust relationship can be strengthened. The intersection of trust in procedures and willingness to collaborate allows us to summarise these positions in four recurring configurations (see Tab. 2.2).

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Tab. 2.2 - Typology of civil society organisations based on the intensity of trust and the nature of institutional relations

	High trust in procedures	Low trust in procedures
High collaborative orientation	Collaborative	Cautiously collaborative
Low collaborative orientation	Critical-reformist	Disenchanted

Source: TRUEDEM research

A first group can be described as *collaborative*. It brings together civil society representatives who place great importance on long-term relationships and on building trust through stable channels of interaction. These actors regard trust as a cumulative process, consolidated through continuity of institutional counterparts, predictable procedures, and the opportunity to participate in structured forms of cooperation. Openness to dialogue and the search for shared solutions are essential elements of this orientation:

> We try to build relationships based on dialogue, quite simply by fostering active citizenship – by doing what an ordinary citizen should do in their everyday experience. The problem is that, over time, we increasingly realise that citizens no longer have the tools to be active, to pursue their own well-being, or to claim their rights. As a result, they are increasingly forced to turn to intermediary actors, such as ourselves, in order to obtain rights that should, in fact, be guaranteed by law. So… […] This is a relationship that is then continuously reshaped over time, depending on emerging needs – and, to put it very directly, depending on the opportunities that can be seized in different historical periods. (CSO03, M, young, micro-level non-economic organisation)

> I believe that our organisation, like all civil society organisations, should be placed in a position to participate meaningfully in the decision-making process. (CSO10, M, middle-aged, macro-level non-economic organisation)

A second profile, which we may define as *cautiously trusting*, includes respondents who acknowledge the value of institutional collaboration but place greater importance on verifying commitments and ensuring consistency between statements and actions. In this case, trust is conditional and depends on concrete signals of reliability: administrative continuity, procedural transparency, clear timelines, and feedback on outcomes. The posture is collaborative but selective and closely monitored:

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

On the one hand, we can be reliable partners. On the other hand, however, we do not want being considered partners to end up constraining us or silencing our voice. This is always a risk, because collaboration is precisely the reason why we do not receive public funding – only European funds – since we believe this could otherwise represent a significant risk in terms of freedom, naturally, of expression vis-à-vis public institutions. […]. At the same time, we have always made it clear that even very close, and in some cases highly effective, collaboration with institutions cannot translate into a gag imposed on us. Therefore, we seek to remain free to express ourselves. (CSO01, M, young, macro-level non-economic organisation)

A third profile, *critical-reformist*, is characterised by a more demanding stance toward institutions. CSO leaders within this configuration acknowledge the need to cooperate with public actors but view trust as a politically significant objective that requires strong institutional commitments: procedural certainty, clear accountability in decision-making, and genuinely effective participation. Collaboration is possible, but it implies substantial institutional investment in democratic quality. Below is a long excerpt that may represent this profile:

So, we started out years ago by fundamentally questioning the issue of representation. In other words, by looking at data, we asked how it might be possible to renew a relationship between citizens and politicians that was gradually deteriorating. Now, in our country, in Italy, people have been talking about a crisis of representation since the 1970s, so this is nothing new. However, it is also true that over the past 15-20 years there has been a very strong wave of anti-politics, which has led to generalisations and, in some cases, to changes in institutions that – in my view – have produced mixed outcomes and others that, […] from our point of observation, are simply wrong and even harmful. Against this background, we came to the idea that if we could introduce mechanisms of transparency within institutions, this might first and foremost foster greater awareness among citizens. The idea is that citizens can truly exercise their role, their democratic right, only when they are informed and aware. (CSO06, M, young, macro-level non-economic organisation)

Finally, some testimonies indicate a *disenchanted* profile, in which a markedly sceptical view prevails about institutions' abilities to generate or rebuild trust. In this case, trust appears to be an asset eroded by scandals, administrative inefficiency and poor results from participatory experiences. Collaboration is not ruled out in principle, but it takes place in a context of scepticism about the institutional capacity to address and resolve the problems of the political system:

We do not trust them at all. In our field – the issue of issues, the climate crisis and the ecological transition – we perceive a very strong gap between the solu-

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

tions we put forward and what politics actually implements at the national level. We believe there is indeed a great, very great distance, and that there are no real policies. There are small steps forward, but these are then disavowed by a whole series of other actions and measures that are subsequently put in place; therefore, we can say that there is absolutely no shared understanding. (CSO07, F, middle-aged, micro-level non-economic organisation)

These four configurations are not mutually exclusive, and the CSO representatives may shift between them depending on context, institutional interlocutors, and past experiences. The typology, therefore, synthesises the different ways in which our interviewees conceptualise institutional trust: as a relational resource, a verifiable commitment, an outcome of procedural quality, or a vulnerable good exposed to the instability of the political system.

The perspectives gathered outline an institutional environment in which trust is built and eroded through everyday practices, inter-organisational relations, and modes of public decision-making. These fragilities have made the use of democratic innovations increasingly urgent, and CSOs view them as potential tools for restoring stability and recognition within institutional processes. The next paragraph examines how these instruments are perceived and evaluated.

2.4. Democratic innovations: CSOs viewpoint

As highlighted by the typology outlined above, trust in procedures is a crucial dividing line in how CSOs evaluate democratic innovations. The difficulties that have emerged in the relationship between civic organisations and institutions – from the fragmentation of decision-making processes to the lack of continuity in institutional counterparts and the experience of participation as a low-yield exercise – constitute the ground on which interviewees assess the relevance of democratic innovations.

For many CSO leaders, innovation does not coincide with the introduction of new instruments in a formal sense, but rather with the capacity of those instruments to make interactions more predictable, outcomes more recognisable, and the trust relationship more stable. This perspective aligns with what has been highlighted in Italian studies on deliberative processes, which view effective participation as an essential factor in rebuilding the link between citizens and institutions (Bobbio, 2007; Allegretti, 2014; Floridia, 2017; De Blasio and Sorice, 2019).

A first point that emerges strongly concerns the gap between the potential of democratic innovations and their implementation. Several inter-

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

viewees describe consultative processes that consume time and resources without producing tangible results, risking further erosion of trust. One testimony captures this feeling clearly:

> The point is that it is not real participation, because participation means that I am involved because my opinion is somehow taken into account, and this does not happen! So participation has unfortunately been reduced, and the tools we have amount to an audition, that is, pretending to listen to you. That is why I call them a 'tired ritual', because I will say my piece and then you will clearly do something entirely different. Every time we have taken part in these tables, not once has even a comma of what we presented… not only we as an organisation, but our broader field… been actually taken up. (CSO11, F, middle-aged, macro-level non-economic organisations)

From this perspective, democratic innovation cannot be reduced to merely expanding the range of participatory opportunities. It requires a transformation in the ways institutions record, process, and return contributions. The credibility of such a participatory process does not arise from its formal inclusiveness but from the coherence between the debating phase and the final decisions – an element directly related to trust as an assessment of the political actors' trustworthiness, as discussed earlier.

Alongside criticism of participatory practices perceived as ineffective, some testimonies instead describe a more structured idea of innovation, centred on co-design and co-programming practices. These instruments are portrayed as a possible way to move beyond episodic consultation and establish pathways grounded in shared political responsibility and mutual recognition:

> Clearly, one interesting instrument that is finally beginning to come to life is co-design, as well as co-programming. These two instruments, which come from community – European – recommendations […]. And this is an important instrument of […] shared responsibility, because upstream and not downstream third-sector organisations, companies too – even for-profit companies – can sit at the same table, at the same level as the public administration. And this is an instrument in which, to be honest, I have personally taken part, representing our organisation in our city. And a few other times, I have participated as a facilitator at the provincial and national levels in co-design processes involving citizens or politicians to create shared instruments. This is an excellent mechanism, in my view, to, again, share this so-called public responsibility. (CSO09, M, young, micro-level non-economic organisation)

Here, trust is described as the product of collaborative practice. The possibility of "sitting at the same table" in less hierarchical roles and of

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

beginning work at the preliminary policy stage is seen as a condition for building familiarity, predictability, and mutual recognition among politicians, CSOs, and citizens. Co-design thus becomes a kind of democratic innovation oriented toward stabilising institutional relations, moving beyond the idea of participation as an isolated event.

The same logic appears in another respondent, which emphasises the link between innovation and genuinely active participation:

> What is missing is serious discussion, getting into concrete issues, explaining the difficulties, explaining what is being done to overcome those difficulties in achieving certain goals. And then what is missing above all is joint planning, co-design. Citizens need to be active participants in change, to be placed in the position of being able to say what is needed, in their view, and how a project or an action should be carried out. Clearly, with the tools that support co-design in these respects. But this is missing; there is a real closure around this. (CSO07, F, middle-aged, micro-level non-organisations)

Trust emerges when people have access to real problems, constraints, and possible solutions, and when citizens can contribute not only to analysis but also to effective decision-making. Innovation, therefore, concerns the structure of the democratic process itself, not only its formal instruments.

Some interviewees go beyond procedural aspects, exploring a broader informational dimension that shapes the digital public sphere. Although references to technology are not systematic, there is a shared perception that the quality of circulating information affects the very possibility of fostering trust. A CSO leader notes, for example, that social media can offer strong participatory potential but are effective only if accompanied by adequate competencies:

> Potentially they have a much more positive impact; the problem is giving people the tools to interpret social media. If social media are left as they are, by themselves, unfortunately the impact is negative. Yet potentially they are an extraordinary tool! Which at least my generation does not fully understand! (CSO03, M, young, micro-level non-economic organisation)

From this perspective, democratic innovation requires an information ecosystem capable of sustaining public learning processes and making institutional dynamics more accessible.

The informational potential of the smartphone is also mentioned in another interview. However, this reference is accompanied by a critical awareness of the distorted uses that often characterise this tool. The excerpt that follows captures the interviewee's position in its complexity. By

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

adopting a broad perspective on the information ecosystem as a whole, the interviewee emphasizes the need to rely on educational and training institutions, which are called upon to promote civic education understood as a continuous and everyday process.

> Beyond the major newspapers – which unfortunately people no longer read, because no one seems to have an attention span of more than two and a half minutes… [points to the smartphone] – this device, and the communicative offer associated with it, inherently carries forms of manipulation. That is, one must have the ability to understand, to establish one's own hierarchy of priorities. More broadly, every cultural tool… hence the central role, of course, of schools and access to education, understood as education for citizenship – truly, in this case, for everyone and throughout life. As a form of education for citizenship. As a daily form of democratic civic education. (CSO18, M, young, macro-level economic organisation)

Taken together, these testimonies outline a vision of democratic innovation that does not focus on introducing new instruments, but rather on building more transparent, coherent, and shared processes. CSOs view innovation as an opportunity to strengthen institutional continuity, consolidate mutual recognition, and make political and administrative responsibilities more intelligible. It is within this framework that trust gains new conditions of possibility, rooted not in symbolic acts but in practices that generate stability, reciprocity, and sustained engagement over time.

Concluding remarks

The voices collected in this chapter offer an image of political trust in Italy seen from the stakeholders' perspective. In the political realm, CSOs are actors who stand in between, translating demands, accompanying conflicts, building ties in local communities, and trying to keep them together over time. It is from this intermediate position that the leaders of civil society organisations view trust, defining it less as an abstract sentiment and more as a daily experience. This perspective aligns with the idea advanced by Norris (2011) and Warren (2018), according to which trust is a relational property rooted in democratic practices.

The definitions that emerged from the interviews show that trust is, first of all, a relationship. It has to do with proximity, with the possibility of finding someone who listens, with the continuity over time of the people and places where interactions take place. Without this minimal fabric – made of recognisable faces, offices, and spaces for dialogue – trust

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

struggles to take shape. Alongside this dimension, a more demanding interpretation also appears: trusting means considering an interlocutor credible, perceiving their consistency, independence, and ability to account for their choices (Cartocci, 2007; Floridia, 2017). In the interviewees' words, trust becomes a form of assessment: a judgement about those who govern and about how they govern. A third, broader and more complex dimension also emerges, in which trust is understood as a condition for the functioning of the democratic system: when it weakens, not only individual relationships deteriorate, but the very possibility of cooperating in a stable way is compromised.

When these interpretive keys are applied to the Italian case, the picture becomes complex and, at times, concerning. Scandals, episodes of mismanagement, and sudden changes of direction are recalled as factors that slowly erode the trust bond. The CSO leaders we interviewed describe a climate in which trust appears selective and uneven: some institutions are still considered relatively stable points of reference, while others struggle to maintain any lasting credibility. At the same time, the distance between the citizenry and public decision-makers is described as a long-term process marked by disengagement, abstention, difficulty recognising the concrete impact of policies, and the perception that administrative structures are scarcely accessible.

Within this framework, more practical problems arise: constantly changing interlocutors, unclear political responsibilities, and opaque decision-making paths. For those trying to build cooperation, these are not technical details but elements directly affecting trust. If it is not clear who decides when and according to which criteria, it becomes harder to invest time, resources, and reputational capital in relationships that could break down unexpectedly.

The experiences of CSO representatives in participation reinforce this tension. They often talk about "tired rituals", roundtables that do not produce visible outcomes, consultations that barely leave traces in the final decisions. In this sense, they do not simply describe a problem but also indicate a minimal condition: without verifiable outcomes, participation loses credibility, and it is difficult to regard it as a genuine tool of democratic innovation (Allegretti, 2014; De Blasio and Sorice, 2019).

The typology proposed in the chapter helps to hold these trajectories together. The "collaborative", "cautiously trusting", "critical-reformist", and "disenchanted" profiles are not fixed categories but recurring ways of positioning oneself in relation to political institutions. In every case, trust is treated as something that must be earned and can be lost, not as a given and inexhaustible resource.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

CSO leaders' attitudes toward democratic innovations help to extend this picture. Instruments that, at least in principle, should strengthen the link between political institutions and civil society – such as co-design, co-programming, and new deliberative spaces – are viewed with both hope and caution. Where these tools have been tested seriously, interviewees recognise significant potential. Sitting "at the same table", sharing responsibilities from the outset, and working on concrete problems make it possible to build familiarity and mutual recognition, essential elements for consolidating trust. At the same time, there is a widespread perception that such experiences are still too limited, often fragile, and risk being overshadowed by more traditional, top-down policy practices.

References to the information environment and social media, which surfaced in some interviews, add another piece to the puzzle. Digital technologies are seen as a potential resource for bringing citizens and institutions closer, yet they require skills and interpretive tools that are often lacking.

The chapter ultimately depicts a landscape in which political and institutional trust is crossed by deep tensions. Civil society organisations move within a context where the crisis of representation, the fragility of participatory processes, and the uncertain use of democratic innovations coexist with more advanced experiences of cooperation, co-design practices, and sincere attempts to share responsibility. No single or definitive judgement emerges, nor a purely pessimistic narrative.

It should also be remembered that the voices we heard belong to structured organisations, with the capacity to engage in dialogue and with a history of relations with institutions. Their perspective does not exhaust the broader landscape, but it illuminates a viewpoint that has so far received little attention in studies on political trust. For this reason, our results suggest several avenues for future inquiry: examining how these orientations evolve over time, comparing CSO leaders' positions with the perceptions of politicians and citizens, and investigating in greater detail the concrete experiences of democratic innovation that could reverse the current trend toward distrust.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

3. The principal's perspective: citizens' views on democratic politics in Italy

by Laurie Beaudonnet and Florent Guntz

> Those are not politicians, they are representatives of the people. The moment we speak ill of them, we speak ill of ourselves. You're wrong to speak ill of politicians, those who sit in Parliament are the representatives, who then, in my humble opinion, represent it very well, because the real crisis is that of the Italian people. So, rightly we have the representatives we deserve. (Roberto, FG3, 60-65-year-old, urban, university education)

As Roberto, a sixty-year-old insurance employee living near Salerno, claims in this quote, what citizens think of their representatives and of the political system is foundational to legitimacy and thus to the quality of democracy. Normative theories of democracy as well as empirical studies conceptualize citizens' political support and political trust as central to regime stability, performance and quality (Dahl, 1971; Easton, 1975; Rawls, 1993; Beetham, 1991; Lipset, 1959; Norris, 1999; Gibson and Caldeira, 1995; Przeworski et al., 1996). Easton's framework remains particularly useful for interpreting these dynamics. He distinguishes between *diffuse support*, referring to citizens' attachment to the political community and to the regime's core institutional principles, and *specific support*, which is based on evaluations of incumbent authorities and their policies. Trust plays a central role in both dimensions, as a condition that enables individuals to invest in political relationships (Levi and Stokes, 2000). On the one hand, mindful scepticism is beneficial to the quality of democracy (Norris, 2022), as attentive citizens can hold government responsible.

On the other hand, persistent distrust toward specific actors, such as the government, can spill over into more general forms of dissatisfaction or alienation from the political system as a whole, thus eroding the quality of democracy (Easton, 1975). These dynamics become even more complex in a multilevel political system such as the European Union, where author-

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

ity and accountability are distributed across local, regional, national, and supranational arenas.

Therefore, this chapter investigates the relationship citizens have with democratic politics and the political system, in Italy. Italy offers a particularly relevant case to investigate these relationships, as the country is marked by a chronic distrust of political elites (Citrin and Stoker, 2018; Bordandini et al., 2024), a fragmented party system (Emanuele and Chiaramonte, 2020; Chiaramonte and De Sio, 2019), and a deep North-South divide shaping citizens' relations to institutions (Putnam, 1993; Bordandini, 2015; Cartocci and Vanelli, 2015).

Such context provides fertile ground for examining how feelings of distance, trust, and responsibility are articulated at the intersection of local, regional, national and European politics. To analyse these dynamics, we rely on qualitative data collected through TRUEDEM focus group discussions (FGDs). We first investigate how citizens relate to political institutions and actors and how symbolic and geographical distances are mobilized by citizens in their views of democracy and everyday practices. Second, we go beyond the expression of distance to analyse political trust and how citizens articulate it in their discussions and perceptions of institutions and political leaders. While we see generational differences in terms of trust, distrust in the system and its actors is present across all groups in our study. But this does not necessarily produce negative feelings. Indeed, the third empirical section focuses on how distrust triggers a broader process of citizens' empowerment and motivates their claim for a bigger role in politics, redefining what democracy means for citizens and how it should function.

3.1. Research methodology

The purpose of focus groups is not to capture individual attitudes, as surveys can do, but to understand how people make sense of politics as part of an interactive and collective process (Ingelgom, 2020). This study does not aim at statistical representativity. Instead, it seeks to provide in-depth insights into how citizens collectively articulate their relationship to politics. Focus groups inherently involve interaction effects: participants may influence each other, adopt socially desirable positions, or reinforce group norms. This research design allows us to observe how people negotiate agreements and disagreements by sharing opinions together, how they collectively articulate their perceptions of politics and democracy. By bringing citizens together to discuss politics in their own words, we can

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

observe how people construct, share, and challenge their perceptions of institutions, politics, and collective action.

As part of TRUEDEM's qualitative study, twenty-one FGDs were held across six EU member states: Czech Republic, France, Greece, Italy, Poland, and Romania[1]. As regards Italy, a total of four FGDs were organized in Salerno (Campania)[2]. It is therefore clear that these discussions capture a specific regional perception of the political situation. To account for age and diversity in education levels, we organized four groups, while ensuring gender balance within groups and in-group homogeneity to the benefit of discussions. Therefore, group 1 included young (18 to 30) urban people with a university degree. Group 2 gathered 30- to 50-year-old rural participants with secondary education. Group 3 included urban people over 60 years old with a university degree. The last group gathered young (18 to 30) suburban participants with secondary education.

Participants were recruited through a professional agency experienced in organizing FGDs for various research purposes. It relied on local networks, community organizations, and social media, following clear eligibility criteria: meeting the characteristics listed above and being Italian or having resided in Italy for many years.

FGDs were conducted in Italian by a native moderator from the University of Salerno, assisted by a co-moderator[3]. Each discussion lasted around two-and-a-half hours. The discussion followed the same semi-structured discussion guide used in the different countries in the TRUEDEM project.

The guide was divided into three main sections:

1. Perceptions of the main issues perceived by citizens – This section included five open-ended questions designed to capture how Italian citizens perceive the main problems they identify and who they believe is, or should be, responsible for addressing them.
2. Perceptions of democratic institutions – This section included four open-ended questions to explore Italian citizens' perceptions of and trust in national institutions, political actors, and new forms of citizen participation such as citizens' assemblies.

1. C. Belot et al., Trust in European Democracies: Politicians, Civil Society, and Citizens across 10 European Countries [Data-set]. TRUEDEM Consortium, with the participation of the Jean Monnet Center Montréal (université de Montréal). 2025.

2. This project has been approved by the Ethics Committee for Research in Arts and Humanities at the University of Montreal (Project no. CERAH-2023-5029 - December 15, 2023). Likewise, the project was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Salerno (February 19, 2024). The research team that collected the data was therefore composed of the authors of this chapter, as well as Felice Addeo and Valentina D'Auria, whom we thank for their collaboration in the field.

3. See the previous note.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

3. Perceptions of the European Union – This section included three open-ended questions to examine citizens' trust in and perceptions of European institutions.

All discussions were video-recorded and later transcribed and translated into English to ensure cross-country comparability. The translation of participants' quotes may therefore soften idiomatic expressions or emotional nuances. Whenever possible, key Italian terms were retained to preserve authenticity. Our analytical strategy focused on identifying discursive patterns rather than counting frequencies: how participants justified their lack of trust, what metaphors they used to describe politics, and how emotional tones – anger, irony, or resignation – structured their talk. These patterns became crucial for the three empirical sections of this chapter, which examine (1) the symbolic and geographical dimensions of distance from politics, (2) the meanings and generational dynamics of political trust, and (3) the increasing individualisation of responsibility in Italian citizens' discourse.

The following sections build on these methodological foundations to unpack how Italian participants, from different backgrounds, describe their relationship to politics – from the margins of distrust and disengagement to the centre of personal responsibility and agency.

3.2. Distance and attitudes towards politics

The literature on Italian citizens' relationship to politics highlights a recurring set of distances – symbolic, psychological, territorial, and structural – that deeply shape their political attitudes and behaviours. These distances do not only refer to a physical separation from institutions, but also reflect perceptions of inaccessibility, misunderstanding, or disconnection, which durably affect how citizens evaluate the political system and engage with it. Participating in political processes requires from citizens to make sense of the process and to feel heard and represented. Feeling excluded from decision-making processes results in broad disaffection and low levels of political participation (Cicognani et al., 2017). The relationship is particularly strong among younger people, who often develop a form of passive disengagement due to the lack of spaces allowing for meaningful participation or critical reflection (Tzankova, Prati and Cicognani, 2021). Angelucci and Vittori (2023) further demonstrate that perceptions of territorial marginalisation, particularly in peripheral or disadvantaged areas, foster feelings of abandonment, weakening trust in both local and national institutions. Bordandini et al. (2024) identify a category of "disgruntled

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Italians", characterised by genuine civic engagement but strong institutional distrust, while Stanzani (2020) highlights significant geographical variations in trust, particularly pronounced in the country's North-West.

Our qualitative data give concrete substance to these findings. Far from being abstract, institutional distance emerges as a lived and articulated experience, frequently discussed by participants, especially younger ones. We have identified at least five analytical dimensions along which we can perceive this institutional distance.

Let's start with what we can call *vertical distance* between citizens and political representatives. Among educated young participants, political representation is described as an excessively long chain, marked by a significant gap between citizens and the upper levels of the political system. Participants emphasise that there is *too much space* between the different levels, making it difficult for the citizens' voice to circulate effectively. One participant draws on the metaphor of *the telephone game* to capture the progressive distortion of the citizen' will as it moves through the layers of representation: the further it moves away from the local level, the more it becomes diluted, ultimately producing political representatives who, in participants' view, no longer reflect voters' initial expectations. This perception reveals a pronounced form of symbolic distance, but also constitutes a critique of the structure of the political system itself, deemed too complex and insufficiently connected to individuals' everyday experiences.

[Moderator] So, in your opinion, between here and here [points to the two extremities of the diagram] there's too much space?

[Elisa] Absolutely! There's too much gap

Moderator: So, in your opinion, the voice of citizens doesn't reach here [points to the highest levels of the diagram]?

[Elisa] No, absolutely not [overlapping voices]

[Samuele] It's a bit like the telephone game: the message starts and in the passages the content is lost.
(FG1, 25-30-year-old, urban, university education)

Here, a key role may be played by the complete lack of familiarity with political representatives, particularly members of Parliament. As a young participant explains:

[Francesca] Eh but maybe… In my opinion here too there's too much space [points to the political system diagram]. I can't have trust in the Parliamentarian because I don't even know the Parliamentarian. (FG1, 25-30-year-old, urban, university education)

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

The absence of basic information, proximity, or direct contact makes the relationship of trust difficult, if not impossible, to establish. This psychological dimension refers to an *affective and cognitive distance*, in which the representative appears as an abstract figure rather than an actor endowed with actual legitimacy. This mechanism is not anecdotal: it reflects a deeper process through which political trust is shaped, negotiated, and often eroded (Hetherington, 1998; Easton, 1965). When citizens cannot identify their representatives, attribute specific qualities to them, or evaluate their actions in a meaningful way, the very foundations of trust become fragile (Levi, 1998; Hardin, 2002). In our focus groups, this sentiment emerges repeatedly, particularly among younger participants, who describe a form of political anonymity that breaks the relation between representation and accountability.

Such observations directly anticipate the dynamics explored in Section 3.3, where political trust is conceptualised as an evaluative orientation grounded in expectations about institutional performance and the perceived trustworthiness of political actors (Hetherington, 1998; Citrin and Stoker, 2018). This emotional, cognitive, and relational distance described here feeds into these evaluations, echoing longstanding arguments on the role of proximity and familiarity in sustaining trust (Putnam, 1993; Almond and Verba, 1963). It illustrates how mistrust may develop not from apathy or disengagement, but from the difficulty of recognising elected officials as credible and responsive figures. In this sense, psychological distance functions as a precursor to broader patterns of institutional distrust, shaping how citizens position themselves *vis-à-vis* the political system as a whole (Torcal, 2017; Bordandini et al., 2024).

Another dimension is *structural distance* – indeed, participants also refer to the distance linked to the very structure of the political system. The high number of elected officials, the heaviness of procedures, and the perceived operating costs of institutions are mentioned as successive filters that alter the message and reinforce citizens' sense of disconnection. Such perceptions echo long-standing analyses of Italian institutional performance, where bureaucratic complexity and administrative fragmentation have been showed to weaken citizens' sense of efficacy and proximity to the State (Putnam, 1993; Almond and Verba, 1963; Bordandini, 2024). As expressed by Valeria (40-45-year-old teacher in a hotel management school):

[Valeria] It depends on how it's done because if decisions are made in a way that allows everyone to express their opinion, you can achieve honest results. The problem lies in the interference between the people and what reaches the

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

top. […] It could create divisions because the idea of sending the message, "the people want this", should arrive clear and unfiltered! If I say "left", it's left; if I say "right", it's right, no interference. (FG2, 40-45-year-old, rural area, secondary education)

These critiques reflect a broader perception of a system that is overloaded, fragmented, and difficult to decipher, a complexity that reinforces the feeling of structural distance. Participants often describe political institutions as structurally distant not only because they are large, but because they are perceived as cumbersome, slow, and insufficiently responsive to local needs, a pattern consistent with recent findings on perceived institutional performance and its effect on trust (Angelucci and Vittori, 2023; Stanzani, 2020). The sense that "too many people" and "too many layers" stand between citizens and decision-makers feeds into the wider dynamics of distrust explored in the next section, where evaluations of institutional efficiency, fairness, and coherence emerge as key determinants of political trust (Hetherington, 1998; Bordandini et al., 2024).

Territorial distance also plays a central role, particularly among older participants. Several express regret over the loss of direct links between elected officials and their regions of origin, noting that parties today often impose candidates unfamiliar with local realities. The example of a deputy elected in a region she does not know is cited as emblematic of the weakening of territorial representation. As expressed by a retired participant with a university degree:

[Pasquale] I agree with [Roberto], regarding what he said about territorial representation. I used to vote for a person who represented my region. Today, the name is imposed by the party. Take the example of Marta Fascina, who's from Lombardy but was elected in Catania, if I'm not mistaken. She doesn't represent the territory; she doesn't even know it, so this is not okay. It worked better before. (FG3, 60-65-year-old, urban, university education)

This critique echoes the literature highlighting the importance of local anchoring in building political trust, especially in contexts marked by strong regional disparities. Here, the perceived distance is not merely geographical: it also corresponds to a disconnect between local concerns, cultures, and national partisan logics.

Finally, young participants emphasise a *cultural distance*, strongly related to the profound transformation of political parties. Politics is described as having shifted toward a logic of image, to the detriment of local anchoring and collective debate. The disappearance of local party sections, once essential spaces for discussion and political socialisation, contributes

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

to a cultural distance between citizens and institutional politics. As Fiorenza, a student without university degree, explains:

> [Fiorenza] But the problem is that politics looks much more at the image than before. Not to express political opinions, but from Berlusconi onwards, before Berlusconi there was practically a *cursus honorum*, in the sense that before you started from the municipality because there were parties with headquarters in every city, and so it was debated. Even a young person got a party card, lived politics on the small scale, and then could grow slowly, until reaching being elected President of the Council. While, now, it's all a matter of image because, in fact, it goes to these channels where they do the theatre, I call it, because they insult each other, you can't even understand what they say. […] That's why then, in the end, young people's opinions are never there, I mean, young people's interest is almost never represented in electoral campaigns. (FG4, 18-20-year-old, suburban, secondary education)

Echoing the collapse of the traditional party system and the weakening of Italy's historic political division between, white (Christian-democratic) and red (communist) regions over the last two decades, participants associate this evolution with a loss of reference points and with the idea that political careers no longer stem from progressive local engagement but rather from media visibility, reinforcing the sense of exclusion among younger generations.

Taken together, FGDs confirm that distance from institutions in Italy is a profoundly multidimensional phenomenon. It first manifests as a vertical distance, linked to the perception of an overly long chain of representation unable to transmit citizens' voices faithfully. It also takes the form of a psychological distance, fuelled by the anonymity of representatives and the difficulty, even the impossibility, of identifying with political actors perceived as distant or interchangeable. The territorial dimension is equally central: the weakening of local anchoring and the disconnect between elected officials and regional realities contribute to a persistent sense of non-representation. A structural distance also emerges, linked to the perceived complexity and heaviness of the institutional system, alongside a cultural distance, reinforced by the disappearance of traditional spaces for debate once provided by local party sections and by the rise of image-driven politics.

These different forms of distance converge toward a single finding: the relationship between citizens and institutions is weakened, not due to disinterest or withdrawal from politics, but because of a widespread perception of long-term and systemic disconnection. Notably, all the focus groups demonstrate a solid understanding of the Italian political system, its levels

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

of governance, and its mechanisms[4]. The expressed distance does not stem from a lack of information or misunderstanding of institutional functioning, but rather from an informed and reasoned critique of contemporary political practices. This configuration naturally leads to the next section, dedicated to the dynamics of institutional trust and distrust, and to the ways in which citizens navigate this fragmented political landscape to articulate their relationship to the system.

3.3. Trust in political institutions and leaders

Hetherington's seminal definition of political trust connects citizens' evaluation of the government with their normative expectations, as a "basic evaluative orientation toward the government founded on how well the government is operating according to people's normative expectations" (1998: 791). Going one step further, Easton (1965) distinguishes between diffuse conception of the political system (*diffuse support*) and specific views on the current government (*specific support*). Both concepts could then be re-phrased as trust in the political system as a whole and trust in the current government and political personnel.

Italy stands out as a poster-case for low levels of trust, going back to Putnam's explanation of the role of social capital (1993) and Almond and Verba's argument about civic culture (1963). Research highlights a consistent pattern of low trust in political institutions and leaders, with generational differences indicating that younger people are more critical or distrustful. Trust is shaped by perceptions of institutional performance, corruption, and contextual factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic and neighbourhood conditions (Laurano, 2022; Teizera and Freire, 2012; Angelucci and Vittori, 2023; Stanzani, 2020). Recent works have showed that political trust in Italy is low but stable (Citrin and Stoker, 2018: 54). It did not collapsed after the Great recession, as it did in other Southern European States, like Spain or Greece, despite the system being strongly hit by the economic crisis and the political turmoil that followed (Torcal, 2017; Bordandini et al., 2024; Emanuele and Chiaramonte, 2020). The literature highlights very strong regional differences (Bordandini, 2015; Bordandini et al., 2024), and while our data does not allow for regional comparisons, they certainly underline that dynamic as participants provide numerous ac-

4. It is worth noting here that the people involved in the discussions had secondary or tertiary education. A portion of the Italian population does not reach these levels of educational attainment.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

counts of the specificity of their political experience and specific local or regional context.

First of all, as demonstrated in the previous section, the concept of *distance*, perceived or actual, is central to the ways citizens articulate their perceptions and relations to politics. Literature shows that perceived peripherality and distance to institutions correlate with lower trust in both local and national authorities (Angelucci and Vittori, 2023; Munoz, 2017). Across all FGDs, perceptions of institutions are rooted in local and regional experience. Participants often refer to the specificity of the local experience and culture. However, relying on experience does not necessary equals to trust, and participants express strong distrust towards all levels of governance, across all groups. This distrust extent to the media system, which participants in all groups see as relevant to their perception and understanding of politics. Media outlets are mostly acknowledged as not trustworthy as a whole, due to the overall polarization of society and media sphere and the difficulty for participants to assess the veracity of news reports. However, some participants work around this by cherry-picking news based on specific journalists they trust more, or based on articles shared on social media or recommended on web-browser. These practices underlines the importance of individual agency for those participants, as this participant explains:

> [Ilaria] I probably do a mix. I also watch Sky TG 24, it often happens to me. But, regarding the discourse on trust, to tell the truth I don't have a newspaper or a network that I trust more. Maybe I like to follow individual journalists who may have my same line of thought more. In that case I can read or delve deeper into what they think about a certain topic. (FG1, 20-25-old-year, urban, university education)

Beyond the perceived distance, political trust is the result of an evaluation. Individuals assess the government's action and behaviour based on their normative views on how a democratic system should work and what are they expecting from specific institutions and political personnel. In the Madisonian tradition, vigilance and informed suspicion are essential to democratic life: by staying alert to what officeholders do, citizens can criticize, constrain, and elicit responsiveness. Building on this logic, Norris (2022) advocates "trust but verify", a normative stance of informed scepticism that prizes institutional trustworthiness while encouraging citizens to scrutinize power. As Levi (1998) and Hardin (2000) argue, distrust can be socially beneficial when it entails noncompliance with official falsehoods or illegalities, thereby triggering institutional correctives. When normative

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

expectations are not met, this translates into political distrust. Distrust is conceptualized along three dimensions: *interest-incongruency* (when government is perceived as disconnected from citizens, not acting in their best interests); *moral norms* (when politicians are perceived as unethical, corrupted or not having required moral qualities); *technical incompetence and failure* (when the system is evaluated based on its perceived performance) (Bertsou, 2019: 221-222). Across all FGDs, participants engage with evaluation across these three dimensions, assessing to what extent institutions and politicians, at various governance levels, are *fit for duty*.

The dimension that surfaces the strongest in FGDs is the third one: the idea that politicians do not deliver, more specifically that they cannot be trusted based on their promises, is present in all groups, regardless of the level of education or the age group, as Mario, an electrician in his mid-twenties puts it:

> [Mario] So, currently, I wouldn't trust anyone, because so far they allow, promise, promise, but almost no one does anything concrete. (FG4, 25-30-year-old, suburban, secondary education)

As an explanation for this lack of trust, some participants, such as Gina, highlight the lack of ideological reference points in the political competition and the fact that candidates do not commit to party manifestos anymore:

> [Gina] I believe that everyone makes beautiful programs, but once they've settled in, they take the programs and throw them in the trash. So, reading the programs is beautiful, but if they implemented them. (FG3, 75-80-year-old, urban, university education)

More generally, participants link their lack of trust to the non-replacement of the political class and the fact that all parties have been in power at one point or another, without delivering good results. In line with the literature, we see here a strong general distrust of the regional and national political class, as Luisa voices:

> [Luisa] I don't trust anyone. I have reach a point where… I, in fact, don't go to vote, and I am not ashamed to say it. (FG3, 70-75-year-old, urban, university education)

In addition, when asked about the qualities a good politician should have, there is a consensus on transparency, competence, and ethical behaviour. Here again, there is a general agreement across FGDs that current

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

politicians do not exhibit these qualities, with representatives being described as focused on personal gain, incompetent and dishonest, as Eros, a worker in the recycling industry in his twenties underlines:

> [Eros] Qualified, transparent. Qualified, I think it's the minimum. Our political class is anything but qualified, but qualified is the minimum. Transparent because I believe that transparency is the basis of politics, transparency between what is said and what is wanted. (FG4, 20-25-year-old, suburban, secondary education)

The interest-incongruency dimension is present as well, although not directly linked to issues of political trust by participants. They point at the numerous layers of governance and symbolic distance between them and the top-level political power as an obstacle to adequate representation. The disconnection between citizens and their representatives is said to result from both the different institutional layers, as highlighted in section 3.2, and the poor qualities of politicians, deemed self-oriented and not defending citizens' interests *per se*.

This wide gap between normative expectations and how citizens perceive politicians is mentioned as a strong source of distrust by participants in all groups, with a specific emphasis among the fourth group, where participants are both young, living in more peripherical areas and do not have a high level of education, all dimensions that reinforce the perception of disenfranchisement.

These very critical stances against politicians stand in contrast with the trust participants claim to have in the political system as a whole, and with the Parliament in particular. While Easton's model predicts that a strong lack of trust in politicians and policy output will transform over time into a lack of support or trust into the system as a whole, our participants say otherwise. Indeed, they strongly and unanimously criticize their representatives and the output of the system, but they also show support for representative democracy and the Italian political system.

This exchange between three young participants helps unpacking the mechanism at stake here:

> [Federico] No, I would not change anything in particular [in the political system].
>
> Moderator: So, do you trust these elements that are part of the system, the way they work, the way they decide?
>
> [Eros] Yes.
>
> [Mario] I trust the way they should work.
>
> (FG4, 20-30-year-old, suburban, secondary education)

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

While some participants in other groups stress that citizens should have more leverage in the political system overall, to reduce the distance between citizens' will and policy outputs, all participants express support for the system as it is, *on paper*. Both representatives and citizens alike are portrayed as the source of the problem, the reason the system is failing. But it does not tarnish participants' image of the political system, as they express diffuse support on various occasions across all groups:

[Fiorenza] Yes, I agree. For me, I mean the Italian system and, in general, also of the Constitution, for me, are perfect. But, in fact they don't work, I mean everything is there for a reason, for example the President of the Republic acts as guarantor; then there are also other guaranteeing bodies that ensure that there is no absolute domination of the majority. The system is like this for a reason and, in my opinion, it's perfect, but…
[Mario] Excuse me if I interrupt you, just think of the past, when there were people who were worth inside this system, it worked. For me there's no other demonstration.
[Annarita] Yes, surely the first to have to change are the citizens.
(FG4, 18-30-year-old, suburban, secondary education)

The participants' critical views of individuals extent beyond representatives to reach any citizen, and even the whole society, as Roberto, 60-65 year-old insurance employee from Salerno, formulates more bluntly:

[Roberto] The real crisis is that of the Italian people. So, rightly we have the representatives we deserve. (FG3, 60-65 year-old, urban, tertiary education)

Participants often refer to the "Italian specificity" as characterised by clientelism and corruption, as a cultural trait that cannot help but derail a good political system, as formulated by Giusy, in the second focus group:

[Giusy] Of course, within the political class, there are incompetent and non-transparent people, and assuming they "go there to steal" is a harsh generalization, but unfortunately, it's rooted in Italy's past. Maybe it's an Italian trait, I don't know. But changing the system would, in my opinion, make things worse. (FG2, 30-35-year-old, rural area, secondary education)

Normative expectations extend to citizens themselves, in particular among the relatively less educated group, in which participants call for a collective improvement of levels of education and information as a way to ensure good political participation and informed voting. For many participants, citizens should change their attitudes towards politics, becoming more informed and engaged, as a way to reform the system and live up to the normative expectation they have for their country.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

3.4. Placing citizens at the centre of politics

Let's focus now on the increasing individualisation of responsibility in Italian citizens' discourse. The reconfiguration of traditional political practices in Italy has gone hand in hand with a growing emphasis on individual agency in democratic life. Far from being limited to institutional spaces or partisan engagement, political participation increasingly manifests through personalized and fragmented forms of action. This tendency aligns with a broader trend in contemporary democracies, where the process of individualisation, understood as the increasing responsibility placed on individuals to enact democratic change, has reshaped both the meaning and practice of civic engagement. This shift also echoes the dynamics identified by Marangoni and Padoan (2025), who show that individuals increasingly anchor political judgments in personal experience, perceived rationality, and expectations of responsibility. These transformations resonate with classical theories on civic culture (Almond and Verba, 1963), where participant orientations coexist with institutional scepticism, as well as with Putnam's broader reflections on the decline of collective civic structures (2000).

In the Italian context, several strands of literature highlight the contours and consequences of this shift. Tzankova, Prati and Cicognani (2021) underline the importance of participatory experiences and critical reflection in fostering civic engagement, emphasizing that empowerment often arises through direct, experiential involvement rather than through traditional party structures. These insights suggest a tacit expectation that individuals mobilize their own resources and networks to participate in democratic life. Recent focus-group research by Marangoni and Padoan (2025) further shows that trust and distrust are increasingly constructed through experiential, individualized criteria, such as perceptions of consistency, transparency, and respect, rather than through party identification or institutional allegiance.

Beyond formal politics, scholars like Marsh and Akram (2015) and Dalton and Weldon (2005) observe an increasing turn toward alternative forms of engagement, especially among younger citizens. These include community service, online activism, and direct action, which function as substitutes for conventional modes of participation such as party membership or electoral participation. In Italy, this is particularly pronounced in socio-economically marginalized settings, where Angelucci and Vittori (2023) and Stanzani (2020) note that feelings of exclusion or institutional abandonment can drive citizens toward protest, protest voting, or grassroots social action. These forms of engagement are often framed as a

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

response to systemic shortcomings, reflecting a desire to reclaim agency outside traditional channels.

At the same time, recent scholarship documents a broader detachment from institutional politics. Alekseyenkova (2024) highlights how disillusionment with populist parties, initially embraced as alternatives to established political elites, has led to a further shift away from formal participation toward more individualized, often issue-based forms of political action. As one of our participants phrases it:

> [Roberto] There we have to do self-criticism, we should, when we go to vote, worry about voting not because we are angry, and consequently first we vote for the Five Star Movement, then we vote for Brothers of Italy, we are always looking for the Savior of the moment. (FG3, 60-65-year-old, urban, university education)

While these behaviours are not inherently apolitical, several studies raise concerns about their impact on society. The atomization of participation might weaken the social bonds and shared narratives that enable coordinated democratic change, potentially contributing to a broader process of depoliticization. This diagnosis is reinforced by the notion of the "disgruntled Italians" (Bordandini et al., 2024), a growing group of citizens who remain politically active yet profoundly distrustful of political institutions, further illustrating how engagement and distrust increasingly coexist in contemporary Italy.

What emerges from the Italian focus groups aligns closely with the patterns described in the literature. We observe the autonomy of individuals as political agents through a process that appears relatively clear and transgenerational. First, there is a widespread rejection and/or disappointment toward national and European institutions. In response to this institutional distrust, participants tend to valorise the local level while expressing scepticism toward political actors more broadly. This dynamic leads to a demand for individual agency – whether expressed collectively, individually, or through specific roles within their communities. These findings resonate strongly with Bordandini et al. (2024), who show that contemporary Italian civic culture is increasingly shaped by politically engaged yet deeply distrustful citizens, the "disgruntled Italians", whose profiles match many of the attitudes expressed in our focus groups. They also echo Marangoni and Padoan (2025), who demonstrate that the construction of trust/distrust is deeply intertwined with citizens' personal experiences and expectations of accountability.

The rejection of national and European institutions takes on two distinct forms. Regarding national institutions, two phenomena stand out. First, as widely observed in Italy (e.g., Dunford, 2008), the North-South divide re-

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

mains a defining political and social fracture. This observation is consistent with Putnam's classic findings (1993), which show that civic traditions and institutional performance have long differed between northern and southern Italy. The feeling of abandonment expressed in Salerno reflects these enduring regional inequalities. This is strongly reflected in the discussions, where many participants perceive the South as politically abandoned. One participant illustrates this sentiment by invoking historical grievances:

> [Gina] So, it's not the North's fault, the North has always done this with us, it started with Cavour… What did Cavour do? He came here to [a province in Southern Italy], took its treasure, then, little by little he moved all the factories to the North. It's a process that will never end, because our politicians, unfortunately, don't take care of the matter. (FG3, 75-80-year-old, urban, university education)

This statement illustrates not only a sense of injustice rooted in historical memory but also a deep distrust toward national political institutions. It is worth reminding here that FGDs were conducted in Salerno, in Southern Italy, a location likely to reinforce such views and which aligns with longstanding observations about centre-peripheral tensions in Italian politics. These narratives mirror the profiles of "non-civic" and "disgruntled" citizens identified by Bordandini et al. (2024), whose mistrust stems from persistent perceptions of institutional inefficiency and neglect.

The rejection of European institutions, however, is markedly different. As many scholars have shown (e.g., Borriello and Brack, 2019; Aldrin, 2009; Delmotte, 2008), the sense of distance and abstraction surrounding the EU often detracts from its perceived relevance. In the discussions, the European Union is often seen as a trustworthy and influential actor, but one that seems too distant to intervene in local problems. This perception is shaped both by a lack of clarity among Italian citizens about the EU's actual role and by the impression that local issues are better understood and addressed by those who live them directly. Marangoni and Padoan (2024) similarly show that institutional distance, even when not associated with hostility, reduces perceived credibility and effectiveness, reinforcing citizens' reliance on local actors. Annarita, a student from Salerno, expresses this tension clearly:

> [Annarita] I wouldn't know. Well, maybe I would bypass the Italian government at this moment, because I don't see how it's addressing any of these issues. Literally. […] So, I think that surely at European level there is actually an interest, an attention towards these issues. But, at national level no, maybe more local. Locally, I see small groups of people starting to move in this direction. For example, I have a friend who works in the field of immigration in a town in the province

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

of [Province in Southern Italy]; groups of young people who try to protect each other; organizations that create exhibitions on the abolition of nuclear power; […] but in the middle ways there isn't.

[Moderator] By "local" do you mean citizens or..

[Annarita] Yes, citizens, associations, private individuals, but not the Italian Government.

(FG4, 20-25-year-old, suburban, secondary education).

In the broader context of the discussion, Annarita expresses both a lack of trust in national institutions and a guarded openness toward the EU. Yet she emphasizes that real action must come from the local level, especially through citizen initiatives, a feeling echoed widely in the FGDs. This mirrors not only the expectations of individual agency described in the literature but also the empirical reality of citizens who trust European frameworks more than national authorities while still relying primarily on local actors for tangible action (Bordandini et al., 2024). Annarita's statement also reveals the variety of issues through which citizens envision their role: immigration, environmental sustainability, education, and more. Education, in particular, features prominently in discussions, where participants highlight the importance of local actors. For instance, Francesca, a young participant with university education, emphasizes how a school principal can have a more meaningful impact than the national education ministry, advocating for need-based, bottom-up local interventions rather than nation-wide policies.

What emerges from FGDs are the relevance of local action, the centrality of individual citizen agency, and how citizens use their personal experience and network to make sense of political engagement. Taken together, these findings demonstrate how deeply embedded the individualisation of politics is within Italian civic life. Far from signalling apathy, citizens express a clear desire to engage – but on terms that correspond to their lived experience and local realities. This individualisation meets the dual function described in the literature: it emerges as both a coping strategy in the face of institutional distrust (Alekseyenkova, 2024; Angelucci and Vittori, 2023) and as a transformative approach to democratic participation, where change is viewed as most effective when driven by empowered individuals or small communities (Shea, 2015; Tzankova, Prati and Cicognani, 2021).

These results are fully consistent with Bordandini et al.'s (2024) characterization of "disgruntled Italians", a group marked by both political engagement and scepticism toward institutions. They also match the mechanisms highlighted by Marangoni and Padoan (2024), who show that trust and distrust are rooted in everyday experiences and expectations of rational, responsive governance. More broadly, this evolution reflects the

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

long-term transformation of Italian civic culture described by Almond and Verba (1963) and Putnam (1993, 2000), where localized, experiential forms of participation increasingly replace traditional institutional anchors.

The focus group data thus confirm and nuance the theoretical assessments. While they reveal a widespread disaffection toward national politics and a sense of distance from the EU, they also highlight a resilient belief in the political efficacy of localized, personalized action. This suggests a reconfiguration, not a retreat, from democratic life: one in which citizens increasingly reposition themselves as primary agents of political change, navigating between institutional scepticism and the aspiration for meaningful action.

Concluding remarks

Across FGDs conducted in Salerno and its outskirts, a coherent and deeply articulated picture of Italian citizens' relationship to democratic politics emerges: one marked less by apathy than by a complex interplay of distance, distrust, high normative expectations and growing individual responsibility. Far from disengagement, participants display a nuanced understanding of institutions, a strong interest in public affairs, and a capacity for fine-grained political judgment. What their discussions reveal, however, is that citizenship is increasingly experienced from the margins of institutional politics rather than at its core.

The first section illustrated how different forms of distance – vertical, psychological, territorial, structural, and cultural – shape the everyday relationship to politics. Participants consistently describe a political system that feels distant not because it is unknown, but because it is perceived as opaque, fragmented, and insufficiently connected to local realities. Whether through the metaphor of the telephone game, the anonymity of parliamentarians, the weakening of territorial anchoring, or the disappearance of party spaces for debate, citizens formulate a powerful narrative of disconnection. These findings echo longstanding diagnoses in the Italian context, from Putnam's analysis of civic traditions to Almond and Verba's work on political culture, and resonate with more recent studies highlighting inequalities in political representation and experiences of peripherality (Angelucci and Vittori, 2023; Bordandini et al., 2024).

The second section showed how this distance shapes political trust, in line with Easton's distinction between diffuse and specific support and Hetherington's conceptualization of trust as an evaluative process. Participants do not simply distrust political elite and levels of government; they articulate why they distrust them, grounding their scepticism in concrete

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

experiences, unmet expectations, and perceived failures of responsiveness. Trust appears conditional, contextual, and highly relational. The absence of familiarity with representatives, perceived inconsistencies between promises and actions, and the lack of credible intermediaries (particularly within media and party systems) create a fragile environment where citizens struggle to identify actors they can rely on. As trust links citizens to institutions and enhances the effectiveness of democratic governance (Gamson, 1968; Bianco, 1994; Braithwaite and Levi, 1998; Hetherington, 1998), limited trust can breed alienation and the rejection of collective political goals (Sánchez-Cuenca, 2000). However, we find illustrations of a different mechanism here. Indeed such distrust does not translate into the rejection of representative democracy and is not synonymous with cynicism: for many participants, it is part of a vigilant and critical approach to politics, echoing the "trust but verify" stance described by Norris (2022) and the constructive role of scepticism emphasized by Levi (1998) and Hardin (2000). For our participants, representatives and citizens alike should improve their commitment to politics and increase their knowledge and competence, to allow the political system to perform as it should.

The third section demonstrated how these dynamics feed into a broader individualisation of politics. Faced with institutional shortcomings, citizens increasingly turn to localized, personalized forms of engagement. Whether through community-level initiatives, professional roles, or individual commitments to social issues, participants emphasize the capacity – and sometimes the necessity – of acting from below. This aligns with the trends identified by Dalton and Weldon (2005) and Marangoni and Padoan (2025), who describe a shift toward experiential, responsibility-based political action. In this perspective, distrust functions as a catalyst for empowerment: a motivation to assume agency rather than withdraw, although outside traditional political arenas. Participants often describe individuals – teachers, principals, volunteers, associations – who succeed where institutions fail, reinforcing the idea that political change must originate from citizens themselves.

Taken together, these findings portray a democratic landscape in which institutional distance and distrust coexist with strong civic engagement and a renewed sense of personal responsibility. Italian citizens appear neither resigned nor indifferent; they are critical, attentive, and willing to act, but increasingly outside traditional institutional frameworks. This reconfiguration points to a transformation rather than a decline of democratic participation, where the boundaries between institutional politics and everyday civic life are being renegotiated. Understanding this shift is essential for grasping not only the Italian political reality, but broader transformations in contemporary democracies.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

4. *Technocracy and political trust in Italy*[*]

by Domenico Maddaloni and Domenico Fruncillo[**]

Technocracy is a long-standing issue in political theory and institutional practice, and it has become increasingly relevant in the last decades, especially in advanced democratic contexts. In Italy, a country characterised by chronic governmental instability, structural weaknesses of political parties, and cyclical episodes of economic and institutional crises, technocracy is not just a theoretical hypothesis but an operational reality, embodied in "technical" governments, independent agencies, special commissioners, extraordinary administrative procedures, and external conditionalities, particularly those increasingly imposed by the European Union. This form of governance, which favours technical competence over representation and political accountability, has often been presented as an emergency solution that is necessary to "save" the country from itself, its political class, and its democratic dysfunctions (see, for example, Ferrera and Gualmini, 1999). However, as both international academic literature and the qualitative data collected in this research show, this solution is not without consequences. On the contrary, it raises questions about the future of representative democracy, the legitimacy of public decisions, citizen participation and trust in institutions.

* As mentioned in the Introduction, the reflections contained in this chapter lie at the intersection between the TRUEDEM research and two research projects of national interest that we worked on between 2023 and 2025: *Il commissariamento della politica. Come l'amministrazione straordinaria cambia la democrazia - Politics under commission. How special procedures change democracy* (Project Code 2022R7SS2F); and *EPICI - Electoral participation and institutional challengesx for inclusive politics - Partecipazione elettorale e sfide istituzionali per la politica inclusiva* (Project Code P2022RX8N). Neither the European Commission nor the Italian Ministry of University and Research or the University of Salerno are responsible for the content of these pages.

** Domenico Fruncillo is the author of paragraph 4, Domenico Maddaloni is the author of paragraphs 1, 2 and 3. The introduction and concluding remarks are the result of a joint effort.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

This chapter arises from the necessity to critically analyse the relationship between technocracy and democracy in Italy using an empirical and multidimensional framework. It aims to explore the perceptions, assessments, and expectations of three categories of actors: (1) politicians and civil servants who operate within institutions and often have to mediate between political pressures and technical constraints; (2) leaders of civil society organisations (CSOs), who occupy an intermediate position between institutions and citizens, acting as channels for representation, mediation, and mobilisation; and (3) ordinary citizens, the ultimate recipients of public policies, whose trust and participation are necessary conditions for any functioning democratic system.

The concept of technocracy should not be understood simplistically as "government by experts", a definition that risks being tautological or reductive. Rather, it describes a regime of legitimisation that can be either alternative or complementary to the democratic one, based on competence, efficiency, neutrality, and the ability to manage the complexity of an advanced society. In this sense, the ambiguity of technocracy lies in its ability to appear as a rational solution to unresolved political problems while, at the same time, shifting the locus of decision-making from the visible public sphere to opaque circuits that are difficult for public opinion to control (Gallino, 2004; Bobbio, Matteucci and Pasquino, 2006).

Recently, empirical research has begun to investigate more systematically the effects of technocratic governance on citizens' trust and political participation. Cross-national studies have shown, for example, that the presence of technocrats in governments reduces voter turnout in the long term (Bertsou and Pastorella, 2022), attenuates electoral accountability for economic performance (Matland, 1997) and weakens the link between public opinion and public policy (Cotta and Verzichelli, 2007). At the same time, the public debt crisis and management of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe have highlighted the limitations of a decision-making approach that prioritises technical efficiency over democratic legitimacy, generating a widespread sense of political alienation among the most vulnerable social groups.

In Italy, the debate over technocracy has become heated following the appointment of "technical" governments, such as those led by Mario Monti (2011-2013) and Mario Draghi (2021-2022). While these governments were welcomed with relief by sectors of the economic and political elite as an antidote to "demagoguery" and "populism", they also fuelled a widespread sense of frustration among citizens, who were increasingly presented and perceived as passive recipients of decisions taken elsewhere – in Rome, Brussels, or perhaps Washington. In this context, technocracy is less a source of political stability than a driver of democratic disaffection.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

However, it is important to avoid a Manichean view. As the data collected clearly shows, many participants in the research – regardless of their position – do not reject the role of technical expertise in determining political choices *altogether*. On the contrary, there is widespread recognition that, in a world of complex challenges, politics cannot deliver without the contribution of experts. The critical issue is not the presence of expertise but its position in the hierarchy: who decides? Who controls? Who is accountable? And, above all, who is listened to in the definition of political choices?

This chapter attempts to answer these questions. First, we will examine the views of politicians and civil servants, highlighting a widespread ambivalence between recognising the usefulness of experts and acknowledging the risks for representative democracy. Secondly, we will focus on the leaders of civil society organisations, who offer a critical perspective, denouncing the false dilemma between technocracy and populism and proposing models of participatory democracy instead. The following section will be devoted to citizens, who show widespread distrust of technocrats, combined with a desire for greater transparency and involvement, but also deep scepticism about their ability to influence decisions in the current political context. We will then carry out a comparison between the three categories, identifying convergences and divergences not so much along ideological lines (right/left) as along those of institutional role, level of participation and position with respect to decision-making power. Finally, we will present some observations that aim to transcend the Italian case and focus instead on the future of democracy in an era of complexity. In a world where technical expertise is indispensable but insufficient, the challenge is not to choose between technocracy and democracy but to redefine their relationship to preserve both the effectiveness of public policies and the legitimacy of the decision-making process.

4.1. The opinions of politicians and civil servants

In the interviews collected as part of the Horizon TRUEDEM project, the voices of politicians and civil servants offer an internal perspective on the relationship between technocracy and democracy. Although the group of respondents represents almost every political positions, their opinions show remarkable consistency in their criticism, regardless of party affiliation. Politicians and officials do not entirely reject the competence of "technicians", but view it as an instrumental element, subordinate to political decision-making and the democratic responsibility of citizens'

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

representatives. This position is developed along four lines: (1) conditional recognition of the experts' contribution; (2) criticism of the replacement of democratic politics with technology; (3) denunciation of technocracy as an alibi for evading political responsibility; (4) aspiration for a 'strong politics' capable of governing complexity.

From the first perspective, respondents share a pragmatic view of technical expertise. They recognise that in highly specialised fields (e.g., healthcare, the economy, or ecological transition), decisions cannot be made without the expertise of professionals. However, they insist that the role of experts should remain one of support, not leadership. Legitimacy does not derive from technical neutrality but from the ability to operate within an explicit political mandate.

> Technicians, the famous technicians, bureaucrats are useful to politics, because politics, politicians, we are not experts in everything, we need to be guided by those who are experts in each subject. […] In general, when there are positive contributions to politics, they are welcome. The important thing is that politics does not allow itself to be influenced and does not influence, that's it… We must always maintain a neutral attitude, so to speak, and then make the choices that are to be made in specific contexts. (Pol08, F, young, micro politics)

> There are no simple answers to complex problems. So it is obvious that the role of agencies and technocrats is fundamental, even more so when we want to tackle these complex problems on a, let's say, European scale […] Frankly, I don't believe that this role is predominant over politics, because, how can I put it?, the role of technicians is one thing, and the role of politics is something else. (Pol01, M, adult, civil servant)

In short, the point is not whether to use experts, but how, with what guarantees of control, and under what conditions. Competence is not an absolute value but a public good to be governed.

While recognition of competence is widespread, so too is the shared criticism of the primacy of technical expertise. Some interviewees see technical governments – such as those of Monti (2011-2013) and Draghi (2021-2022) – as an ambiguous legacy that has guaranteed stability in times of crisis but also weakened the Italian democratic fabric.

> This is a government that has a much clearer connotation than its predecessors, where the need for coalitions and technical governments could leave even ordinary citizens with doubts that, ultimately, decisions were being made not only above them, but also above the people they had elected, because technocratic responses were needed to meet different needs! I mean, in my opinion, the experiences of the technical governments we have had over the last twenty years have left a flaw that must be removed! (Pol02, M, adult, civil servant)

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Other interviewees elaborate on this assessment. For them, democracy is not just a mechanism for selecting rulers but a continuous process of forming public opinion. Technocracy, when it becomes self-sufficient, disrupts this process. Citizens are no longer active subjects but passive recipients of decisions that are "right" because they are "purely technical". In such a context, not only do citizens feel excluded, but their political representatives are also marginalised.

> It is important that public opinion plays a significant role and is involved in political decision-making processes. So, entrusting everything to the experts, without public opinion having a say, right? With its demands, its proposals, even in the assessment of concrete and real situations… In my opinion, this is fundamental, so technicality or hyper-scientism, right? We saw this with Covid, where everything was actually left in the hands of virologists, so maximum reliance on experts and technicians in such a difficult context, but I didn't see… I mean, there was also a great deal of mistrust. In fact, we also suffered the consequences a little. (Pol11, F, elderly, micro-level politician)

From this perspective, technical delegation is not simply a support for politics but a double layer of opacity: above citizens and above politicians. The result is a vacuum of responsibility that can fuel mistrust and disaffection.

Other interviewees voice their criticism from the opposite perspective but reach similar conclusions. According to them, technocracy often functions as a strategic alibi for a political class that prefers to avoid unpopular choices.

> Politics delegates to technical bodies because very often the space for real alternatives, for truly alternative options, is reduced, especially in the field of economic policy. In fact, there [was] a consensus that things can only be done in one way and therefore it is better that they are done by experts, by technicians. […] And so the more the level of decision-making shifted towards the technicians, who ensured this supposed objectivity of decision-making, the better! (Pol05, M, adult, party official)

According to this line of argument, technocracy is not imposed from outside (by the European Union or the markets) but invoked from within as an excuse for not taking responsibility before the electorate. It is easier to say "a technical authority has set this policy" than to explain to one's electorate why a reform is necessary, even if it is painful. This mechanism, however, has a cost: it erodes trust not so much in experts as in politicians themselves, who are accused of cowardice and lack of leadership. The

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

problem is not a single technical government or the power attributed to a single technical body, but the normalisation of a decision-making model in which political institutions limit themselves, renouncing their role of social mediation and vision for the future.

There is certainly a great distance between institutions and citizens, because, in fact, a disenchantment with politics has gradually built up, with regard to the actions that institutions actually carry out, also because very often what is done is far removed from the real needs of citizens. (Pol12, F, elderly, micro-level politician)

Faced with this drift, the politicians interviewed do not advocate a return to politics "against technocracy", but rather its regeneration. The solution is not to revolt against experts but to have transparent and responsible politics that can integrate expertise into its ranks without being dominated by it. The value of politics lies in its ability to decide, and therefore to take the risk of making mistakes, to be accountable, to mediate interests, and to build coalitions. It is a complex, uncomfortable, but irreducible task. No technical committee can replace this process.

So bureaucrats are needed… not to make decisions in place of politicians but to inform politicians. (Pol16, M, adult, macro-level politician)

This is a government with a fairly clear political mandate, it has its own perspective on stability, it does not have the excuse of technocracy: it decides! They decide! And so we are there to support them. […] In my opinion, MANY politicians have implied this [that the technicians decide], but it was not entirely true! They were weaker, and in politics, gaps must be filled, so if politicians do not make decisions on certain matters, technical choices will probably take their place. However, this only plugs the gap for the moment but it becomes a NEGATIVE legacy for the future. (Pol02, M, adult, civil servant)

From this perspective, there is a need for greater transparency in the decision-making processes within public institutions. This need goes beyond the internal operations of technical bodies to the political sphere..

We need to find a way to ensure greater transparency and easier access to documents [and] we need to make these documents more accessible in terms of content so that as many citizens as possible know what is being discussed and what kind of decisions are being made. (Pol13, F, young, macro-level politician)

In summary, the opinions of politicians and civil servants reveal a nuanced position: they do not fall into the simplistic dichotomy between "good technology" and "bad politics" but propose a balanced model of the

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

relationship between the two. Competence is necessary but insufficient. Politics is imperfect but indispensable. The challenge is to rebuild a culture of political responsibility in which complexity is not a pretext for escaping democracy but an invitation to strengthen it.

4.2. The opinions of civil society organisation leaders

Leaders of civil society organisations offer a somewhat different perspective on the relationship between technocracy and democracy. Unlike politicians, who operate *within* the institutional technocratic system, and citizens, who observe it *from the outside*, they occupy a critical interface position. CSO representatives are familiar with the mechanisms of political decision-making but expose its distortions. They recognise the need for technical expertise while contesting its primacy. They work with institutions and public authorities but highlight their distance from the social community. This position on the borderline between the political system and civil society results in a critical attitude towards technocracy, which is seen not so much as an anomaly as a symptom of a profound crisis of representative democracy.

We can organise the opinions expressed by CSO representatives along several analytical lines, which we will examine briefly below. Even among representatives of this category, the analysis shows underlying themes in a context that expresses a diversity of attitudes and opinions regarding the roles of technicians, consultants, and experts in politics and their consequences for democracy.

To begin with, a constant in the interviews with CSO leaders is the pragmatic recognition of the need for technical expertise, combined with a strong subordination of the technical role to that of policymakers. This is therefore not an ideological rejection of the role of experts, but a clear call for democratic hierarchy.

> So, in terms of my direct experience in the world of, shall we say, politics in quotation marks, in general terms, the experience I have had within the [supranational advisory body], therefore, I am not someone who is unfamiliar with political mechanisms and I KNOW that there is a technocratic apparatus that supports political decisions… Knowing this, I realise how much this apparatus guarantees the CONTINUITY, so to speak, of decisions, but [also] how important the moment of political decision-making is. So in my case, I know that the technocratic apparatus is important, but I know that it needs to be GUIDED, and so I have a great deal of respect for the figure of the politician, the person who has to make the decisions! (CSO12, M, senior, macro-level economic organisation)

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

This quote basically holds that technocracy is not an enemy to be defeated but rather a tool to be used correctly. The problem is not competence, but its increasing autonomy from politics. When experts no longer respond to a legitimate political mandate but act according to their own logic – market, efficiency, external constraints – the link between public decision-making and the collective interest is lost. However, some acknowledge that the growing failures of politics have contributed to the growing role of officials and experts.

> When technocracy, as it is defined, replaces politics and the representatives chosen by citizens, it is clearly a failure, isn't it? Sometimes it is inevitable, as it has been in the past, because it is not possible to achieve the balance that allows a government, rather than other institutions, to be formed in the most democratic way possible, and so it is clear that it is perceived as such. Also because when this happens, it is usually because there is a political, social, but also economic crisis. (CSO16, F, middle-aged, macro-level economic organisation)

Along these lines, we can perhaps find not only a critique of the technocratic drift but also a reminder of democracy's fundamentals. CSO representatives do not idealise politics – on the contrary, they often denounce its fragility – but they insist that no other entity can replace it without undermining the legitimacy of the system.

It should be noted, however, that some CSO leaders share a structural criticism with politicians (see previous section) and citizens (see following paragraph): the appeal to technocracy often serves as an excuse for politicians who do not want to make decisions.

> The concept of democracy… is not EXACTLY shared by everyone. Because certain decisions taken by majority vote within technical committees are then approved by politicians without any DEMOCRATIC evaluation. (CSO05, M, senior, macro-level non-economic organisation)

This statement reveals a paradox in Italian politics. In many circumstances, politicians sign off on technical decisions but do not take responsibility for them in front of citizens. They share the formal responsibility but do not bear the political burden. The result is a lack of *accountability* that can fuel political mistrust.

Thirdly, for some respondents, technocracy is not only an institutional problem but also a social phenomenon that produces, at the very least, a widespread perception that citizens are being marginalised from the decision-making process. It creates an additional screen between institutions and citizens, thereby exacerbating an already chronic distance, especially in the country's peripheral regions.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Certainly [delegating to experts] does not help to strengthen this bond. […] That is, there should be more proximity between institutions and citizens. Instead, putting an additional step in between, which is technocratic, is clearly a distancing. However, this also has to do with the narrative that is created around it, whereby the issue of technicians is often evoked and has ended up becoming, in the public perception, a… A transfer of power, even there, to entities that cannot be trusted. Because I believe that the key point is that ordinary men and women tend not to trust technocrats. That is, they are perceived as something even further removed from us. (CSO11, F, middle-aged, macro-level non-economic organisation)

This perspective is particularly relevant because it traces mistrust not to a generic disenchantment but to a concrete institutional practice. Citizens feel excluded not because they "don't understand politics" but because they aren't consulted on decisions that affect them. Consider, for example, the local development policies financed by the PNRR, designed by technical committees at national and European levels, without consulting those who live in those regions. Technocracy is therefore not neutral at all but focuses on some issues (infrastructure, efficiency, macroeconomic indicators) while remaining blind to others (social justice, local needs, territorial equity). This criticism applies above all to decision-making processes at the state level and, even more so, at the European level. Some complain about the opacity and lack of control over these processes: legal competence and technical expertise do not, in themselves, result in democracy.

Hence the fact that citizens see the European Union only as a technocratic monster, capable of producing vaccines for everyone, albeit in a less than transparent manner, but which then fails to take citizens' opinions into account on other matters. (CSO10, M, adult, macro-level non-economic organisation)

Faced with this drift, some CSO representatives propose that civil society organisations act as mediators between citizens and the political world. They do not see themselves as occasional actors, invested only with an advisory role but as bearers of a different kind of expertise, no less valid than technical expertise.

We are a social promotion organisation, as our statute states, and therefore we are a relationship-based organisation. This means that sometimes there is contact and conflict when laws are unjust and are not supported or are delayed in being approved, and sometimes there is dialogue and relationship building at an institutional level when there are people willing to really change things. (CSO02, M, young, micro-level non-economic organisation)

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

This proximity is not only geographical or emotional but also functional. CSOs work with vulnerable groups (people with disabilities, migrants, the elderly, and the unemployed) and therefore translate real needs into political demands. This translation work is what is lacking in institutional processes, which appear closed to the outside world by those with technical or bureaucratic skills. It is no coincidence that some of the interviewees insist on the need for institutional recognition of this role.

> Clearly, an interesting tool that is finally coming to life is that of co-design, as well as co-planning […] Because upstream, and not downstream, third sector organisations, businesses too, even for-profit businesses! They can sit at the same table, on the same level as public and administration […] This, I would say, is an excellent mechanism, in my opinion, I repeat, for sharing this famous public responsibility. (CSO09, M, young, micro-level non-economic organisation)

This vision is based on concrete experiences with the governance of institutional processes, where CSOs are not invited to comment on already defined policies but to build them together from the outset. However, as the interviewee himself acknowledges, these good practices remain exceptions, not the rule.

In general, civil society organisation leaders take a critical but proactive view of the role of technocracy in democratic politics and governance. Interviewees acknowledge its usefulness but tend to reject its primacy and, at times, criticise its opacity and the political exclusion that results from it. The alternative they propose is to restore the democratic hierarchy: technology informs, politics decides, and citizens participate. In an era of increasing complexity, such a triangulation may appear necessary to prevent democracy from becoming an empty shell, filled with experts who are as invisible as they are irresponsible.

4.3. Citizens' opinions

The opinions of Italian citizens, gathered through focus groups[1] we conducted in March 2024 with participants of different ages, professions, levels of political participation, and ideological orientations, offer yet an-

1. Below are the characteristics of the people selected to participate in the focus groups. FG1: young people between 18 and 30 years of age with a university education; FG2: adults between 30 and 50 years of age with a secondary education; FG3: older people aged 60 and over with a university education; FG4: young people aged between 18 and 30 with a secondary education. All meetings were held in Salerno in March 2024.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

other perspective on the relationship between technocratic trust in representative democracies and citizen political involvement. Unlike politicians and representatives of civil society organisations, citizens very often express judgements rooted in daily experiences of disappointment, frustration and, sometimes, disillusionment towards the actions of public institutions. Therefore, they do not contest the democratic legitimacy of the political system in abstract terms, but rather expose the concrete feeling of exclusion from decisions that affect them.

Here, too, it is possible to identify a series of core themes that highlight similarities and differences in public opinion. To begin with, one of the most significant points of convergence among focus group participants is the recognition of the need for technical expertise in specific sectors, such as health, the economy or the environment.

[Francesca] If you are the director of [an important hospital in a large city in southern Italy] or if you are the Minister of Health, you must have specific skills. [You must have] seen the hospital wards, it's not that [you must have] studied marketing. (FG01, F, care worker)

[Marco] No, but I don't mean that I don't trust you, I mean that I don't know what skills you have to make that decision. I mean, that's why there are departments that have a scope of action, there is the prefect, there are people who are there for a reason. (FG04, M, civil servant)

Alongside the recognition of the value of technicians' and experts' competence in the implementation of public policies, there may also be recognition of the value of expertise upstream of the decision-making process. Some participants argue that without adequate information support on collective problems, it is not possible to reach a valid decision.

[Annarita] If the citizens' assembly discusses issues but has, in a way, not a filter but a support in terms of expertise, it would make sense, otherwise I don't know to what extent it can really be useful, realistically useful. (FG04, university student)

Others object that, given its complexity, the management of political and institutional processes requires the development of specific skills, which is the preserve of political representatives. This is especially true at the "macro" levels of political action, which are further removed from the daily lives of ordinary people and require greater processing and synthesis abilities. It seems no coincidence that among those most likely to recognise the value of politics as a profession are older people with a high level of

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

education and a corresponding level of experience, including in terms of political participation.

[Roberto] [The most important skill is] in politics, in the sense that there is no degree that can teach you this. It is a training that comes from experience, from the relationships that are built over the years with other countries. Having a competent politician who has also developed relationships with politicians from other countries allows you, when you sit at the table of the 27 in Europe or participate in international conferences, to interact, because you already know each other and have discussed the same issues. (FG03, M, independent professional)

However, this acceptance does not result in consent to a government of experts. On the contrary, some participants make a clear distinction between two functions: know-how on one side and decision-making on the other. Along these lines, one might sometimes wonder whether technicians and experts have the privilege of making choices without responsibility.

[Marco] Imagine a mix of people, hyper-educated, with twenty important master's degrees and… Important political issues that have an impact on society, would you trust them? I mean, there's a cross-section of different people, so… do you want to participate? Yes, but… you imagine participating, I mean, I wouldn't trust them. (FG04, M, civil servant)

Criticism also arises regarding the work of technicians and experts, who are sometimes perceived as bearers or defenders of particular interests. From this perspective, technocracy becomes a strategic alibi for a political elite that avoids taking the risk of making unpopular choices. This is the case with recent initiatives in health or environmental policy, which affect established interests or have a significant impact on household or business budgets.

[Giosué] Everything that has been done and is being done for the environment is pure speculation! It serves no purpose, electric cars are absurd! It's absurd! This eco-friendly house is absurd. Everything in the FSC is absurd! It just serves to line the pockets of the same people. (FG02, M, small businessman)

In this perspective, further criticism concerns the lack of transparency in the selection criteria for technicians and experts. This lack of transparency can fuel a climate of mistrust and suspicion.

[Giovanni] But in institutions, officers are appointed by the political class, so… They are directly connected! Therefore, regardless of right, left and centre, good or bad, in my opinion, there is always a direct connection between them. (FG01, M, civil servant)

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

As for the remedies invoked to restore citizens' trust in politics, participants discuss corrective measures within the scope of democratic innovations to strengthen representative democracy. However, this situation may bring the issue of skills back to the forefront. According to some, participation is essential; however, as a preliminary step, it is necessary to develop adequate skills. Or even to be adequately accompanied in the decision-making process.

[Annarita] I would participate, but then I wonder if this would be to the detriment of competence on certain issues […] I mean, if the citizens' assembly decided to vote on political issues, citizens would have to be competent. (FG04, F, university student)

This is particularly true for decision-making areas that are further removed from citizens' daily lives and tend to be more complex.

[Nina] You need to be informed to really understand what is happening on the European scene. (FG02, F, private employee)

In summary, citizens' opinions reveal a democracy struggling with the problems posed by technocracy. In general, they accept expertise but tend to call for democratic control. Apparently, many of them demand inclusion, transparency and shared meanings. The challenge for institutions is to listen to this demand not as a marginal issue, but as the beating heart of a democracy that wants to survive in an era of complexity and transition.

4.4. A comparison between the target groups

Although politicians, officers, civil society leaders, and citizens hold different positions in the institutional field and social structure, their views on the role of technicians and experts in democratic processes show some basic convergence. Technocracy, the handing over of government functions to unelected experts, agencies or commissioners, may not be inherently evil. It becomes a problem when it tends to replace democratically legitimised decision-making, reduce transparency and alienate citizens from political participation. However, there are also some significant differences in tone, perspective, levels of awareness and proposed solutions. These differences are not so much ideological, i.e., linked to the political positions of the survey participants, as they are determined by the roles that each of the groups involved in the research plays in the democratic process.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

More specifically, the first point of convergence among our target groups is the recognition of the role of agencies and technical actors in the context of a political system that remains based on the principles and mechanisms of democracy.

> I think that if technocrats are worthy of government roles, then so much the better. (Pol19, F, adult, macro-level politician)

> I don't expect a politician to know how to build a bridge. (FG03, M, freelancer)

At the same time, as reported in the previous sections, the prevailing opinion among the groups involved in the research is that a clear distinction of roles within the democratic process must be maintained. Expertise informs, politics decides, and citizens participate. We can find a similar attitude in the criticism levelled at technocracy as a substitute for representative democracy.

> When technocracy, as it is defined, replaces politics and representatives chosen by citizens, it is clearly a failure. (CSO16, F, middle-aged, macro-level economic organisation)

Another widespread opinion across all categories covered by the research is that the power of technocracy is often invoked strategically by a political class that prefers to avoid unpopular choices.

> [Experts, commissioners, and agencies] are all things that undermine democratic processes [and are part of] the idea of the state as administrator of processes. And then it's interesting that all these things arose with the crisis in politics, with the crisis in participation, with the crisis in political parties. (CSO18, M, young, macro-level economic organisation)

As we have seen in the previous sections, scepticism about the processes that lead to "technical" assessments or decisions is also widespread. All groups complain about a lack of transparency surrounding these processes: who are the experts? Who appoints them? Who controls them?

> [Technical governments could] leave even ordinary citizens in doubt, in short, that ultimately decisions were made not only above them but also above the people they had elected, because ultimately technocratically different needs had to be met! That is, I mean, the experiences of the technical governments we have had in the last twenty years, in my opinion, have left a mark. (Pol02, M, adult, civil servant)

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Finally, many agree with the opinion that a more transparent democracy capable of involving citizens could be a response to the power of technocrats. As one of the citizens involved in a focus group notes:

In my opinion, we should participate anyway. (FG04, M, university student)

Alongside the points of convergence, we can also identify contrasts of opinion among the participants in our research. Differences in position within the political system result in differences in points of view and levels of awareness of the issue at stake. For instance, citizens occasionally make general judgements that lack sufficient motivation. This stems from the relative distance between citizens' daily lives and the complexity of political and administrative issues.

[The ideal politician, in my opinion] should be fair, but not technocratic […]. Having a technician or specialist in government has never been a good thing. (FG03, M, retired).

On the other hand, the position of representatives of civil society organisations can be defined as critical mediation. Some respondents belonging to this category recognise that they are "inside" the system, but at the same time, they present themselves as legitimate representatives of citizens' interests.

Today, Europe has set itself the task of implementing very forward-looking policies, in which the technical contribution of experts, but also of civil society organisations that can bring their point of view to bear, is particularly important, because otherwise politicians or civil servants alone… would not be able to do it! (CSO01, M, young, macro-level non-economic organisation)

The position of politicians and civil servants is more firmly rooted in the sphere of power, and the degree of awareness shown by representatives of this category is even higher. Politicians know that technocracy is functional to the dynamics of governing society, and the criticism they sometimes make is helpful in sharing the responsibilities associated with this function.

The precondition [for the proper exercise of political activity] is individual ethics, and in my opinion this applies to all professions and in particular to civil servants. (Pol07, M, adult, civil servant)

The municipality is a business that must function well, but above all, the municipality is a community. It represents the feelings of an entire community, and

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

therefore, from this point of view, it is essential to move forward… Precisely by positioning oneself, seeking the ability to listen and relate to reality, and doing so through all possible channels! (Pol15, M, senior, micro-level politician)

These differences also result in a diversity of proposals to overcome the risk of technocratic drift in the political system. Politicians hope for a return to "strong politics", capable of governing competently and making clear decisions:

Whatever anyone thinks, however, this is a government with a fairly clear political mandate, it has its own perspective on stability, it does not have the excuse of technocracy: it decides! (Pol02, M, adult, civil servant)

True political ability, at least in my experience, is that of those who take responsibility for their choices! And those who have the bravery to be unpopular! (Pol17, M, young, macro-level politician)

On the other hand, CSO leaders demand not only transparency in decision-making but also a fair sharing of responsibilities.

[We need] shared responsibility […] Because upstream, and not downstream [of decisions], third sector organisations, businesses too – even for-profit businesses! –, all these can sit at the same table, on the same level as the public administration. (CSO09, M, young, micro-level non-economic organisation)

Finally, citizens are calling for direct participation, which can take the form of participatory or deliberative democracy. However, some participants in our research express scepticism and even fear that direct citizens' involvement could lead to chaos or a new elite rule.

[Marco] [Imagine] an assembly of citizens, people from different backgrounds, therefore from different social classes, with different levels of education. So imagine a mix of people, hyper-educated, with twenty important master's degrees, and important political issues that have an impact on society. Would you trust them? (FG04, M, civil servant)

Concluding remarks

In an era marked by the overlapping of a plurality of crisis factors – economic, health, climate, and geopolitical – technical expertise appears indispensable to the governance of society. However, as the qualitative data

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

collected in Italy consistently demonstrate and as an increasing number of studies on this topic confirms, often from a comparative perspective (Bertsou and Caramani, 2020; Bertsou and Pastorella, 2017; Giannone and Cozzolino, 2023; Angelucci, Bertsou and Pastorella, 2025), the growing reliance on experts, independent agencies, and unelected governments raises unprecedented, structural questions for representative democracy. Apparently, there is a conflict between two logics of legitimacy: one *input-oriented*, based on participation, representation, and political accountability, and one *output-oriented*, based on efficiency, neutrality, and problem-solving (Scharpf, 1999; Merler, 2019). The research presented in this chapter shows that this tension is not only theoretical but is experienced daily by politicians, civil society organisations, and citizens, who, despite their different perspectives, converge on one crucial point: competence is necessary but not sufficient in the context of democratic politics. Without a firm anchorage in the procedures of representative democracy, preferably supplemented by elements of direct citizen participation – individually or in association – in collective decision-making, it risks becoming a mechanism of exclusion, opacity and disempowerment.

Recent literature has persuasively documented the ambivalent effects of technocracy on political trust. On the one hand, technical governments and expert figures can enjoy a "competence premium". In crisis contexts, citizens tend to evaluate positively the ability of technocrats to manage complex problems, especially if the political class appears blocked or self-referential (Merler, 2019; Vittori, Font and Grau-Mira, 2023). On the other hand, however, this output-based legitimacy comes at a cost that can be significant: reduced electoral accountability, a weakened link between public opinion and political decisions, and, above all, an erosion of trust in citizens' ability.

The qualitative data we have collected fully confirm this ambivalence. In particular, citizens do not reject experts as such, but they do reject being excluded from the debate on issues with ethical, social, and territorial implications. This highlights the limitation of technocratic logic: it confuses well-structured problems, where there is a verifiable optimal solution, with poorly structured problems, where the solution depends on values, interests and opinions. In the latter, which constitutes the majority of political issues, the only truly decisive competence is that of the political actor or institution that mediates, negotiates and synthesises sometimes conflicting needs or aspirations. If this process is removed from the public sphere and entrusted to agencies or individuals not subject to democratic scrutiny, trust does not increase but shifts to "someone competent". Moreover, if this agent makes a mistake or appears biased, as happened during the pandem-

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

ic in many countries, including Italy, mistrust can become widespread and absolute (Lavezzolo, Sarrica and Brondi, 2021). It is no surprise that one of the most documented effects of technocratic governance is the decline in voter turnout (Angelucci, Bertsou and Pastorella, 2025). Indeed, this type of governance fuels a vicious circle: the legitimacy crisis of democratic politics justifies the resort to technocracy; in turn, technocracy further weakens participation and trust in politics, making the resort to "non-political" solutions more likely in the future. The result is a progressive hollowing out of representative democracy, not through a *coup d'état* but through silent erosion.

Faced with this drift, neither a return to purely majority politics nor adherence to purely technical governance offers adequate solutions. The challenge, as all the groups interviewed explicitly recognise, is to rebuild a balance between competence and democracy. Contemporary literature offers some conceptual tools to outline this complex synthesis. The model of deliberative democracy (Dryzek, 2000; Fishkin, 2018) suggests that participation should not be spontaneous or vaguely informed but structured, informed and facilitated. Citizens should not replace experts but discuss with them in contexts designed to encourage listening, reflection and debate. Experiences such as *citizens' assemblies* – cited favourably by several interviewees and some focus group participants – have shown in various countries (France, Ireland, and Canada) that ordinary citizens, once given access to balanced information and the opportunity to engage with experts, are capable of formulating sophisticated and forward-looking recommendations (Vittori, Grau-Mira and Font, 2024).

At the same time, the concept of co-responsibility, invoked in particular by some CSO representatives, refers to a model of multi-level *governance* in which expertise is distributed among institutions, experts, and civil society (Fung, 2015). In this model, politics takes on the roles of direction, synthesis, and responsibility. This vision overturns the dominant narrative, since it is not expertise that replaces politics but politics that must govern expertise.

In this context, the Italian case takes on particular significance. Technical governments such as those of Dini, Monti and Draghi were welcomed as providential in times of crisis, but they left an ambiguous legacy. On the one hand, they brought about greater macroeconomic stability, but they also resulted in a further distancing between political institutions and citizens, particularly in the country's peripheral areas. The implementation of the post-pandemic Recovery Plan, entrusted to extraordinary commissioners and centralised technical structures, may reproduce the same pattern and achieve the same results: effective but poorly legitimised decisions,

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

transparent only in appearance, and insensitive to the specificities of individual territories.

At the European level, the challenge is even more complex. People often perceive the European Union as the epitome of technocracy, characterised by opaque decision-making mechanisms, rigid economic constraints, and a persistent democratic deficit (Matthijs, 2017; Fabbrini, 2014). However, as some CSO representatives acknowledge, the EU has also developed innovative practices for involving civil society (the European Economic and Social Committee, structured dialogues, participatory platforms) that, although imperfect, may offer opportunities for a democratic dialogue.

In conclusion, the research presented in this chapter shows that technocracy, far from being a neutral solution to the failures of political institutions and élites, is itself a political phenomenon with profound implications for trust and participation. As Pierre Rosanvallon (2008) has argued, the crisis of representative democracy in European countries is not one of effectiveness but of legitimacy. Citizens do not oppose competence; they oppose being treated as subjects of a government foreign to them. The answer cannot be a further escape into technocracy, but to renew democracy itself, through more open, participatory and accountable institutions.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

5. Norms, perceptions and trust in Italy: a quantitative survey

by Angela Delli Paoli

Trust and trustworthiness are central mechanisms through which contemporary societies regulate uncertainty, coordinate action, and stabilise expectations. In late-modern social systems – characterised by functional differentiation, accelerated change, and the growing salience of "systems of expertise" (Giddens, 1990; Beck, 1992) – citizens increasingly rely on institutional performances, procedural safeguards, and symbolic cues to evaluate the reliability of actors outside their own life-world, including political and administrative ones. Trust toward public authorities, and the perceived trustworthiness of those authorities, are therefore not static attitudes but multidimensional orientations shaped by moral expectations, assessments of competence, experiences of procedural fairness, and broader narratives of risk and vulnerability.

Italy presents a particularly significant case for analysing these processes. Historically marked by cycles of corruption scandals, contested political leadership, and strong local solidarities, the Italian context embodies what sociological literature describes as a "particularistic-universalistic tension" (Simmel, 1990; Banfield, 1958; Gallino, 2000). The Italians maintain robust interpersonal bonds but often express ambivalence or scepticism toward formal institutions. In such settings, institutional trust cannot be understood solely as a reflection of performance; it also expresses deeper cultural models, moral expectations, territorial inequalities, and life-course dynamics.

This chapter examines trust, perceived institutional trustworthiness, and normative trustworthiness as interlocking components of citizens' evaluative orientations. By integrating item-level analysis, composite indices, socio-demographic profiling, and a theory-driven typology, the chapter analyses how Italians articulate expectations for institutional behaviour, evaluate actual performance, and translate these orientations into trust pat-

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

terns. In doing so, it emphasises the relational and interpretive dimensions of trust, highlighting how citizens draw on culturally sedimented schemas to navigate institutional complexity. From this perspective, the analysis offers a sociologically grounded perspective on how citizens' evaluative frameworks emerge, vary across social and territorial contexts, and contribute to broader configurations of democratic legitimacy.

5.1. Theoretical background

In sociology, trust has long been considered a foundational mechanism for managing complexity in modern societies. Classical theorists such as Simmel (1990) and Lühmann (1979) provided the conceptual basis for understanding trust as a mechanism for reducing uncertainty, while Giddens (1990) emphasised the rise of systemic trust in late modernity. Recent scholarship has extended these foundations by examining how citizens evaluate institutions through multidimensional assessments of institutional trustworthiness, incorporating competence, integrity, benevolence, and procedural fairness (Devine et al., 2024; Murtin et al., 2018).

Recent studies indicate that institutional trust is not just a reaction to performance; it is also a broader way of judging that is shaped by social norms, perceptions of procedural justice, and the availability of information. Comparative studies show that fairness, impartiality, and integrity are among the most powerful predictors of trust toward political institutions and actors, often more influential than output performance (Bauhr and Charron, 2018). These findings reinforce the view that trust emerges from the alignment between what citizens expect and what they perceive institutions to deliver.

Three sociological dynamics are particularly relevant for understanding trust in contemporary democracies.

1. *Moralisation in institutional expectations*

As public institutions become more complex and opaque, citizens increasingly rely on moral attributes – honesty, fairness, and corruption avoidance – to evaluate institutional trustworthiness. Cross-national analyses confirm that integrity and impartial rule-following are central determinants of trust (Devine et al., 2024; Charron, Lapuente and Rothstein, 2013). This reflects a broader cultural shift toward ethical universalism and accountability in democratic societies.

2. *Reflexive individualisation and critical evaluation*

Late-modern citizens act as reflexive evaluators of institutions. Perceptions of procedural fairness, impartiality, and responsiveness predict

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

political trust as strongly as perceived competence, signalling the rise of conditional and performance-sensitive trust (Rudolph and Evans, 2005). Research on informational environments further demonstrates that trust is influenced by media fragmentation, misperceptions, and the symbolic representations of institutions (Van der Meer, 2017; Norris, 2018, 2022), suggesting that trust responds not only to institutional behaviour but also to interpretive contexts.

3. *Layered trust ecologies*

Trust is embedded in territorial, generational, and relational structures. Comparative analyses indicate that governance quality and social capital interact to create distinct "trust ecologies" across regions, while subnational studies reveal systematic geographical variations in trust associated with administrative performance and civic infrastructures (Charron Lapuente and Rothstein, 2013). A growing literature also distinguishes perceived institutional trustworthiness from actual performance, showing that citizens frequently under- or overestimate institutional functioning, producing "unwarranted distrust" or "unwarranted trust" (Van der Meer and Zmerli, 2017).

These insights indicate that trustworthiness must be understood not simply as policy performance but as a relational property grounded in shared norms, cognitive frames, and culturally embedded expectations. Normative trustworthiness – what citizens believe institutions ought to do – serves as a cultural template for evaluating public authority, while perceived trustworthiness – what citizens believe institutions actually do – reflects everyday experiences and information cues. Their alignment or misalignment forms a key mechanism underlying institutional legitimacy.

By adopting this sociological lens, the analysis shifts from viewing institutions as service providers to understanding them as interpretive systems whose legitimacy is continuously reconstructed through the interaction between expectations, performance evaluations, social identities, and territorial inequalities.

5.2. TRUEDEM quantitative research methodology

The empirical analysis presented in this chapter draws on data from the TRUEDEM quantitative comparative survey on citizens' trust, perceived institutional trustworthiness, and democratic evaluations across 24 EU Member States (summer 2025)[1]. The survey design adheres to estab-

1. See also the Introduction for a more general overview of the entire research process.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

lished norms in the social sciences and is specifically intended to elucidate the multifaceted, socially integrated character of trust within complex societies. From a methodological perspective, the survey employs a probability-based stratified sampling design to ensure national representativeness along key dimensions of social differentiation. The samples are stratified by gender, interlocked age groups, educational attainment, and regional distribution according to the NUTS classification. This reflects the sociological understanding that trust is influenced by demographic position and territorial embeddedness. Data were collected through CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing) using Demoscopy's national online panels. Each country sample includes approximately 1,200 respondents (1,500 in France and Germany); the Italian dataset used in this chapter includes 1,215 valid cases, consistent with the adult population distribution. All procedures comply with European data protection regulations and rely on informed consent. The questionnaire – developed collaboratively by the TRUEDEM research consortium – underwent careful translation, linguistic harmonisation, cognitive testing, and a preliminary *soft launch*.

It includes batteries dedicated to political trust, perceived institutional qualities (integrity, competence, impartiality, and procedural reliability), and normative expectations regarding what should make a political actor trustworthy. These blocks were standardised and, where necessary, randomised to reduce order effects and ensure comparability across national contexts.

A rigorous post-stratification weighting procedure was applied to correct for differential non-response and guarantee representativeness. TRUEDEM uses a ranking algorithm calibrated to Eurostat population benchmarks for gender, age (interlocked), education, and regional distribution. These weights are crucial from a sociological standpoint, insofar as they allow the analysis to capture the actual stratification of trust and trustworthiness within societies where demographic and territorial inequalities contribute to differentiated relationships with political institutions. The weighting procedure for Italy ensures the appropriate reflection of regional variations, historically marked by unequal administrative capacity and civic infrastructures.

Conceptually, the chapter adopts a multidimensional operationalisation consistent with sociological theories of trust and contemporary approaches to institutional legitimacy. Three analytical constructs are distinguished:

1. *Institutional trust*, conceptualised as an evaluative orientation towards political and administrative systems, indicating how individuals position themselves within broader structures of social integration.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

2. *Perceived institutional trustworthiness*, measured through items capturing integrity, competence, impartiality, and procedural reliability – dimensions rooted in classical sociological understandings of authority, moral expectations, and system credibility.
3. *Normative trustworthiness*, derived from a multiple-response battery of yes/no items, representing the moral and cultural criteria that citizens believe should ground trust. Aggregate indices (0-100) reflect the internalised value frameworks through which individuals assess public actors.

All indices were standardised on a 0-100 scale to facilitate interpretation and comparison across dimensions.

To analyse the alignment between expectations and evaluations, the chapter introduces a typology based on the median split between the normative and perceived trustworthiness indices. This yields four meaningful categories – *satisfied demanders*, *critical citizens*, *low demanders*, and *resigned/alienated* – which are theoretically grounded in sociological literature on value-performance alignment, moral order, reflexive citizenship, and political disappointment. This typology serves as an analytical lens for exploring social and territorial inequalities and for examining how different groups articulate distinct orientations toward political institutions.

Taken together, these methodological decisions ensure that the empirical analysis not only measures trust and trustworthiness but also does so in a way that remains sensitive to the sociological processes – stratification, regional embeddedness, normative cultures, and reflexivity – that shape citizens' relationships with democratic institutions in contemporary Italy.

5.3. Levels and indices of trust

The Italian trust profile emerges when examining the item-level distribution across the 25 trust indicators (q1-q25). Compared with other EU Member States, Italy exhibits a mixed pattern, combining areas of relative alignment with the EU average and several domains where Italy scores notably lower while remaining close to the EU average for in-group ties, such as family (q17). The difference for neighbours (q19), although still small, is slightly more pronounced than for family ties.

Table 5.1 summarises these patterns, showing that the most pronounced negative deviations concern political parties (q4), the judiciary (q5), and banks and corporations (q11) – sectors historically associated with corruption, elite capture, and bureaucratic inefficiency (Della Porta and Vannucci, 1999; Sberna and Vannucci, 2013).

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Tab. 5.1 - Italy vs EU: Mean Scores by Trust Item (q1-q25)

Item	**Italy**	**EU Mean**	**Δ (IT-EU)**
q1 - National Government	2.17	2.21	–0.04
q2 - Regional Government	2.28	2.42	–0.14
q3 - National Parliament	2.22	2.23	–0.00
q4 - Political Parties	1.95	2.07	–0.12
q5 - Judiciary	2.35	2.52	–0.17
q6 - Head of State	2.40	2.52	–0.11
q7 - Head of Government	2.32	2.47	–0.15
q8 - Elections	2.47	2.60	–0.13
q9 - Armed Forces	2.85	2.91	–0.06
q10 - Church	2.53	2.69	–0.16
q11 - Banks and Corporations	2.39	2.63	–0.24
q12 - Labour Unions	2.46	2.57	–0.11
q13 - Civil Society	2.66	2.75	–0.09
q14 - People of Another Religion	2.75	2.82	–0.07
q15 - People of Another Nationality	2.86	2.95	–0.09
q16 - Supporters of Other Parties	2.67	2.74	–0.07
q17 - Family	3.55	3.59	–0.04
q19 - Neighbours	3.12	3.16	–0.04
q20 - Strangers	2.61	2.65	–0.04
q21 - European Commission	2.46	2.60	–0.14
q22 - European Parliament	2.46	2.58	–0.12
q23 - European Council	2.39	2.53	–0.14
q25 - Generalized Trust	5.32	5.74	–0.42

Weighted averages for 25 trust items comparing Italy with the EU mean (EU excl. Italy).

Table 5.1 illustrates a widespread yet non-extreme pattern of mistrust, with Italy systematically scoring below the EU mean in institutional, social, and outgroup items, while remaining closer to the European average for close relational ties.

A particularly meaningful dimension emerging from the data concerns the distinction between *neutral institutions* – those perceived as expert-driven or non-partisan – and political institutions, which are embedded in electoral competition and partisan conflict. The results indicate that neutral bodies tend to enjoy higher legitimacy than explicitly political ones.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Institutions perceived as politically neutral, such as the judiciary (q5), the armed forces (q9), and the EU institutions (q21-q23), show average trust levels that are substantially higher than those of institutions with a more pronounced political profile, such as the government (q1), regional governments (q2), parliament (q3), political parties (q4), and the head of government (q7). This differentiation reflects a broader structural pattern in European democracies, where citizens increasingly value competence, impartiality, and expertise over political representation when assessing institutional reliability.

This pattern reinforces a trend documented across Southern Europe and other politically volatile democracies. Expert-based institutions retain procedural legitimacy, while elected political institutions suffer from low diffuse support (Bickerton and Accetti, 2017; Torcal and Montero, 2006). In Italy, this cleavage is particularly marked due to a historical combination of party system instability, corruption scandals, and contested political leadership (Della Porta and Vannucci, 1999; Emanuele, 2015).

Overall, the item-level results confirm a coherent profile: strong local solidarity combined with structurally fragile confidence in distant, politicised, or supranational institutions. This reflects a classical particularistic trust regime, where interpersonal forms of solidarity coexist with weaker orientations toward formal institutions.

To move beyond item-level granularity, we aggregate items (as means) into five theoretically grounded composite indices, which reflect well-established trust dimensions in comparative political sociology (Delhey and Newton, 2005):

1. *Political Trust Index* (q1-q8): Encapsulates trust in the main institutions of representative democracy.
2. *Social Trust* in Institutional Actors (q9-q13): Measures confidence in societal and economic actors.
3. *Out-group Trust* Index (q14, q15, q16, q20): Captures trust toward culturally, politically, or socially distant groups.
4. *In-group Trust Index* (q17, q19): Focusses on close social relations (family, neighbours).
5. *Supranational Trust Index* (q21-q23): Assesses confidence in EU institutions.

All indices are computed both for Italy and for the EU average (excluding Italy).

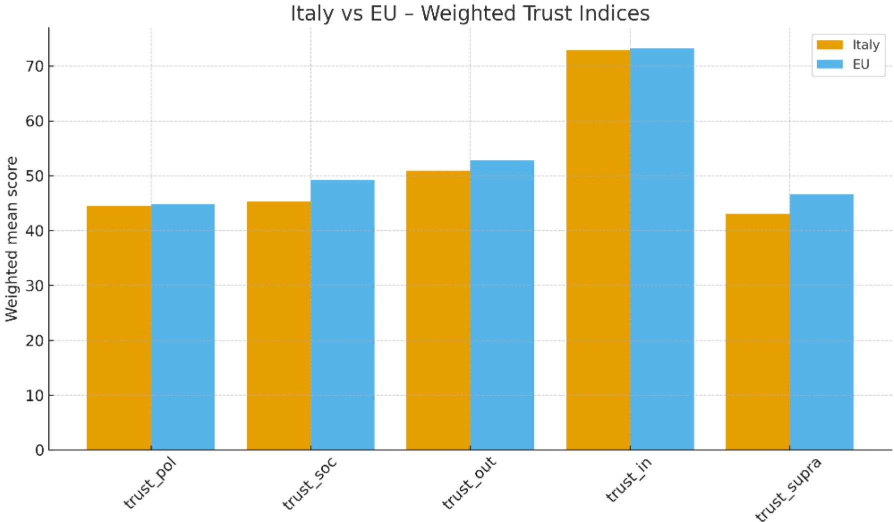
Weighted comparisons show a differentiated and selective trust configuration in Italy (Fig. 5.1). Overall, Italy aligns closely with the EU mean in terms of trust in political institutions and, even more so, trust in in-groups, where the gap with the European benchmark is minimal. However, more pronounced differences emerge in two specific areas: trust in social insti-

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

tutions (such as education, healthcare, and the media) and trust in supranational institutions. In both dimensions, Italy records substantially lower levels of trust than the EU average, confirming a pattern observed in other comparative studies where the relationship between citizens and collective institutions appears particularly fragile. Trust in out-groups is also slightly below the European level, suggesting a more cautious stance toward social alterity. Yet the magnitude of these differences remains moderate, suggesting scepticism rather than hostility.

Overall, the evidence points to a selective configuration of trust: relatively high and stable in interpersonal spheres but more critical toward social and supranational institutions, which constitute the main areas of divergence from the broader European context.

Fig. 5.1 - Weighted trust indices Italy vs Eu



Weighted average levels of institutional trust in Italy compared with the European mean across five dimensions: political institutions, social institutions, out-groups, in-groups, and supranational institutions.

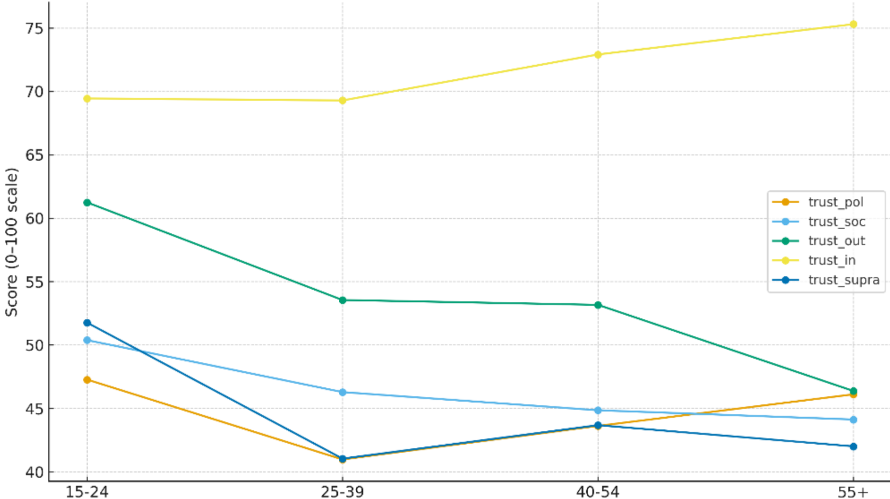
The multidimensional structure of trust in Italy displays meaningful variation across gender, age, and NUTS-2 regions. The analysis relies on trust indices scaled 0-100. Age was reconstructed from year of birth and recoded into four groups (15-24, 25-39, 40-54, 55+); categories with tiny frequencies (e.g., non-binary, transgender) were excluded from the gender comparison; regional variation relies on q170, aligned with NUTS-2 units.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Gender differences are modest but align with known patterns in political sociology: men tend to display slightly higher political trust, whereas women show marginally higher out-group trust, although the size of these differences remains small across all indices, pointing to gendered orientations toward institutions and social diversity (Newton and Zmerli, 2011). Other trust dimensions show minimal gender gaps.

By contrast, age-based differences are substantial, revealing a clear generational gradient. Young Italians (15-24) show the highest out-group trust (≈55) and supranational trust (≈46), consistent with theories of youth-led cosmopolitanism and pro-European orientations (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Adults aged 25-39 emerge as the most critical group – displaying the lowest political trust (≈41), social trust (≈43), out-group trust (≈49), and supranational trust (≈41). This mid-adult cohort shows sharper attitudinal scepticism than both the younger and older generations. Older adults (55+) exhibit relatively high institutional trust and strong in-group trust (≈73), consistent with life-cycle effects and greater attachment to familiar institutions (Fig. 5.2).

Fig. 5.2 - Trust indices by age group (Italy)



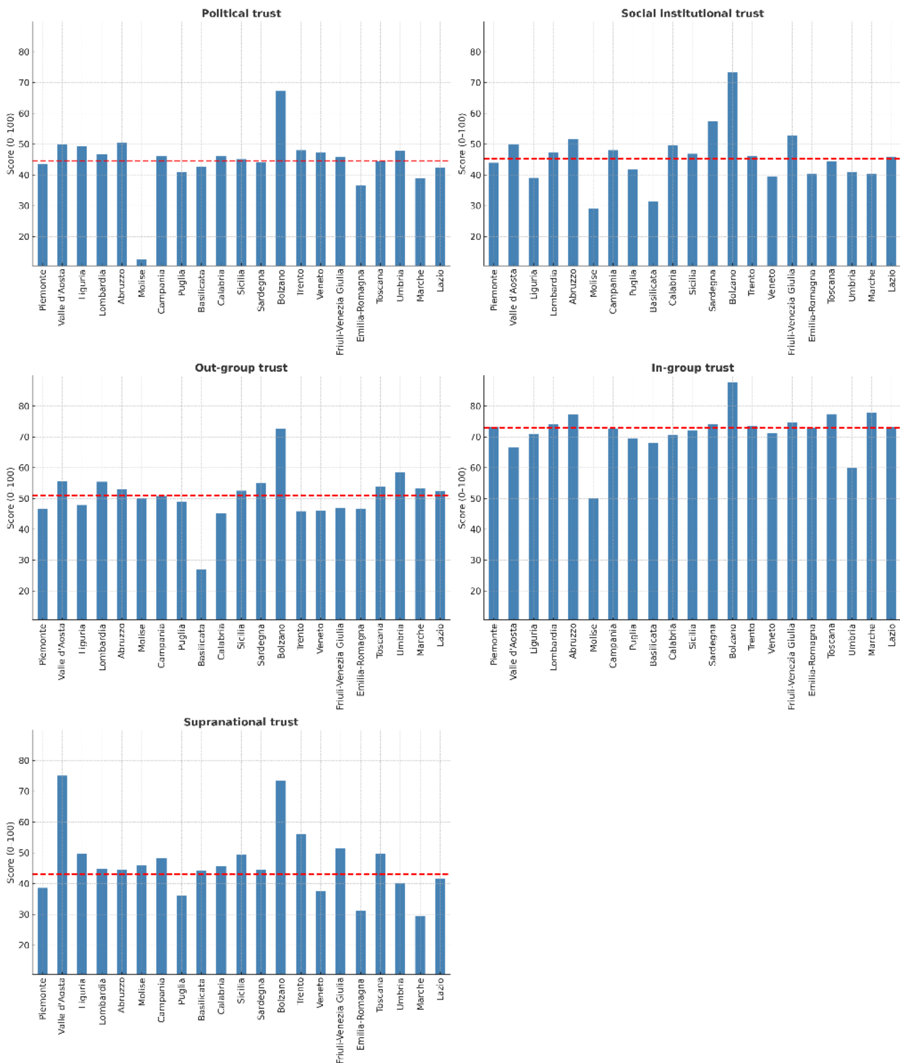
Weighted distribution of trust profiles by age.

The multi-panel comparison of trust indices across Italian NUTS-2 regions reveals a strongly differentiated territorial structure (Fig. 5.3). Political and social trust display the clearest North-South gradient:

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

– Northern and autonomous regions (Bolzano, Trento, Lombardy, and Veneto) consistently score above the national mean;
– Several southern regions (Campania, Calabria, Basilicata, and Molise) fall substantially below it, reflecting longstanding disparities in administrative capacity, institutional performance, and civic infrastructures.

Fig. 5.3 - Regional Variation in Trust Indices



Multi-panel visualization of trust indices across Italian NUTS-2 regions.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Out-group and supranational trust exhibit a more complex geography, with some central and northern regions (e.g., Tuscany, Emilia-Romagna, and part of the North-East) showing higher openness toward diverse groups and EU institutions, whereas others remain closer to or below the national average, indicating the interplay of local political cultures, demographic composition, and regional exposure to diversity.

In-group trust shows relative homogeneity across regions, with values consistently high throughout the peninsula, confirming the resilience of strong primary ties in the Italian social structure.

Overall, the regional pattern reinforces Italy's classification as a medium-low, particularistic trust regime but also highlights marked internal variation, with a high-trust northern cluster, an intermediate and heterogeneous centre, and structurally weaker institutional trust in parts of the South. These territorial patterns reflect long-standing inequalities in administrative performance, civic infrastructures, and regional state-citizen relations (Putnam, 1993; Trigilia, 2005; Cartocci, 2007).

Taken together, the item-level, composite, and sociodemographic results depict a trust landscape characterised by strong bonding ties, comparatively limited and uneven bridging capital, and marked territorial and generational inequalities in institutional legitimacy. Minimal gender gaps, pronounced age gradients, and entrenched North–South divides converge to position Italy within the medium-low, particularistic trust regime typical of Southern Europe.

5.4. Perceived trustworthiness

To analyse trustworthiness, we first examine *perceived trustworthiness,* which refers to citizens' evaluation of whether institutions behave in an honest, competent, impartial and procedurally reliable way (Mayer et al., 1995; Levi and Stoker, 2000). Items q26-q34 capture these dimensions empirically (see Tab. 5.2). We first examine the item-level distribution of these variables, capturing respondents' expectations regarding the likelihood that political, administrative, and media actors behave in competent, honest, transparent, and accountable ways (measured on 1-10 likelihood scales).

Italians judge as only slightly likely that public services improve after complaints (q27 = 5.19), that the government acts in the public interest (q28 = 5.17), that journalists report accurately on politics (q29 = 5.33), or that the state protects personal data effectively (q30 = 5.65). Expectations surrounding accountability and sanctioning are even weaker: respondents doubt that ministers are held responsible for wrongdoing (q31 = 5.02), that

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

they would resign after misuse of public funds (q32 = 4.72), or that politicians would face disciplinary measures for sexual misconduct (q33 = 4.78).

These values suggest generalised scepticism rather than outright cynicism, situating Italy within the mid-to-low range of European trustworthiness perceptions.

The starkest indicator is the likelihood that a politician accepts a bribe, which respondents evaluate as *highly likely* that a Member of Parliament would accept (mean = 6.48), yielding a reversed integrity score of just 4.52 – evidence of entrenched expectations of political corruption, long documented in Italian political culture (Della Porta and Vannucci, 2012; Charron, Lapuente and Rothstein, 2013).

Overall, perceived trustworthiness in Italy shows a combination of moderate expectations and persistent scepticism, which becomes clearer when placed in comparative perspective. At the item level, Italians express only limited confidence that public services improve when citizens complain, that the government acts in the public interest, or that journalists provide accurate reporting. Expectations regarding data protection (q30) and public-interest orientation (q28) are slightly stronger yet remain mid-range. The perceived likelihood that a Member of Parliament would accept a bribe is high (IT = 6.54), virtually identical to the EU average (6.51), confirming that elite integrity is widely distrusted across Europe, not only in Italy (Della Porta and Vannucci, 2012; Charron, Lapuente and Rothstein, 2013). This convergence across countries highlights the structural nature of integrity concerns in contemporary democracies, where perceived corruption of political elites remains a persistent transnational issue.

More distinctive are Italy's deficits in sanctioning and accountability. Italians are substantially less likely than other Europeans to believe that ministers would resign after misusing public funds (q32 IT = 3.59 vs. EU = 4.38) or that politicians would be disciplined for sexual misconduct (q33 IT = 4.00 vs. EU = 5.30) – the largest gap observed across the trustworthiness battery. These gaps point toward a stable perception of weak horizontal accountability, consistent with diagnoses of "accountability deficits" in Southern Europe (Bauhr and Charron, 2018).

Italians also diverge negatively on procedural safeguards, scoring below the EU mean on media accuracy (q29) and data protection (q30), consistent with evidence that politicisation and fragmentation of the media system weaken perceptions of informational reliability (Aalberg and de Vreese, 2017). By contrast, perceptions of government impartiality (q28) are slightly more positive in Italy than the EU average, partly because several Central and Eastern European countries display dramatically lower scores.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Tab. 5.2 - Perceived trustworthiness items

Item (expanded label)	**IT**	**EU**	**Δ (IT-EU)**
q26 - Likelihood an MP accepts a bribe	6.54	6.51	+0.03
q26_rev - Integrity (reversed)	4.46	4.49	–0.03
q27 - Public services improve after complaints	4.76	4.91	–0.15
q28 - Government acts in citizens’ interest	4.39	4.15	+0.24
q29 - Media report accurately on politics	4.83	5.07	–0.24
q30 - Government protects personal data	4.99	5.60	–0.61
q31 - Ministers are held accountable	4.31	4.39	–0.08
q32 - Minister resigns after misuse of funds	3.59	4.38	–0.79
q33 - Politician disciplined for misconduct	4.00	5.30	–1.30
q34 - Government can reduce inflation	4.21	4.19	+0.02

Note: weighted averages for perceived trustworthiness items (q26–q34), Italy vs EU (EU excl. Italy).

To operationalise perceived institutional trustworthiness in a theoretically coherent manner, items (q26-q34) were aggregated into four composite indices using arithmetic means.

The *Integrity Index* averages bribe rejection (reverse-coded), perceived sanctioning of corruption and fairness/honesty (q26_rev, q27, and q28), reflecting the moral and anti-corruption components of trustworthiness. This configuration draws on the behavioural and moral dimensions identified in classic trustworthiness models.

The *Competence Index* aggregates evaluations of service improvement and inflation management (q29, q34), mirroring the “ability” dimension of the classical ABI model (Mayer et al., 1995).

The *Impartiality Index* relies on the public-interest item (q31), which operationalises the central element of the Quality of Government framework (Rothstein and Teorell, 2008).

The *Procedural Reliability Index* combines responsible data handling, media accuracy and procedural fairness (q29-q33), capturing aspects of rule-based, transparent and accountable governance.

Finally, the *Overall Trustworthiness Index* averages all nine items, providing a synthetic yet theoretically coherent measure of perceived reliability across integrity, competence, impartiality, and procedural performance.

When aggregated into composite indices, a coherent and theoretically meaningful pattern emerges across Europe. Integrity-related perceptions – captured through bribe rejection (q26_rev), the perceived sanctioning of corruption, and honesty–fairness items – are consistently low in all EU Mem-

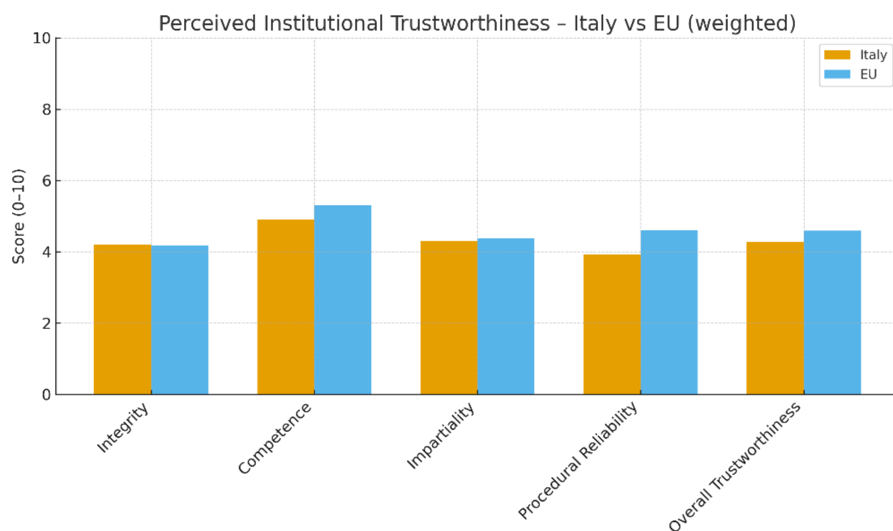
Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

ber States. Italy does not differ dramatically from this general European pessimism about elite integrity; rather, where Italy diverges is in the intensity of deficits observed in sanctioning capacity and procedural reliability. Italian respondents systematically report lower levels of confidence that institutions credibly punish corruption, protect personal data, ensure accurate media reporting, or apply rules in a fair and predictable way. This weakness in procedural reliability is reflected both in the dedicated sub-index and in the Overall Trustworthiness Index, where Italy scores below the EU average – indicating that concerns about the functioning of institutional safeguards extend across integrity, competence, impartiality, and procedural behaviour.

By contrast, the Competence Index, which captures perceptions of service improvement and inflation management, shows only modest deviations from the EU mean, suggesting that performance-related assessments are less polarised. The Impartiality Index, which operationalises whether officials act in the public interest, positions Italy slightly below the European reference point but not as sharply as the procedural dimensions.

Taken together, these findings portray a configuration of fragile procedural legitimacy, where citizens acknowledge some institutional capacities but remain sceptical about fairness, accountability, and rule-based behaviour – dimensions central to democratic legitimacy (Levi and Stoker, 2000; Scharpf, 1999; Warren, 2017) (see Fig. 5.4).

Fig. 5.4 - Perceived institutional trustworthiness in Italy and the EU (weighted means, 0-10 scale)



The figure compares Italy and the EU average across five composite indices of perceived institutional trustworthiness, each scaled 0-10 to reflect their absolute magnitude.

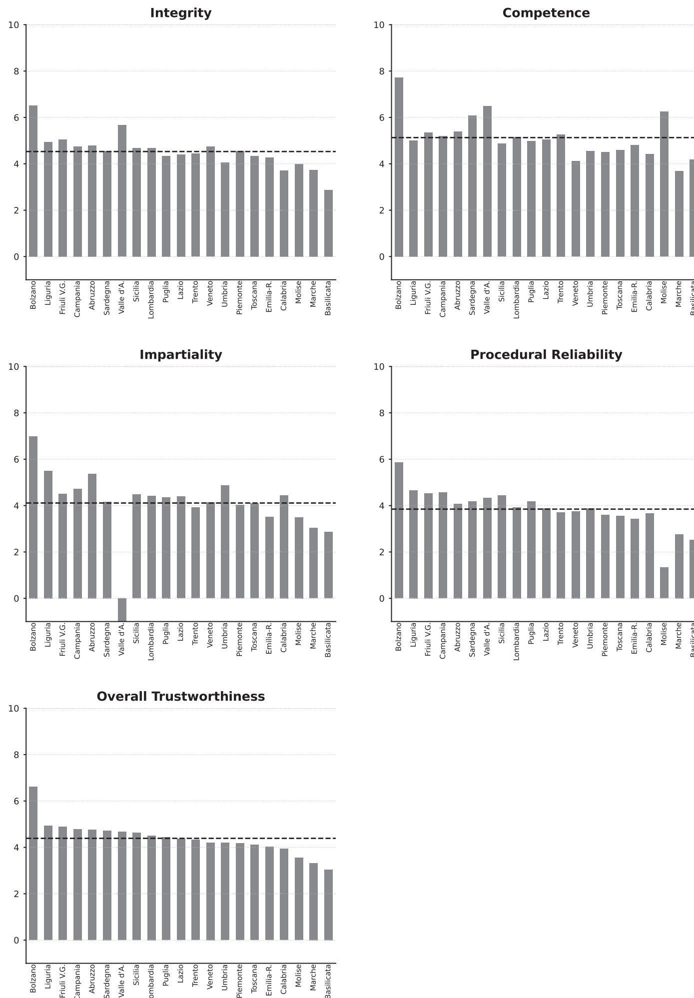
Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

These national disparities intersect with Italy's internal social gradients.

Gender differences remain modest, with women generally reporting slightly higher trustworthiness across all indices.

Age effects are more pronounced: the youngest cohort (15-24) displays the highest levels of competence, impartiality, and procedural-based trust-

Fig. 5.5 - Trustworthiness indices by NUTS-2 regions (Italy)



The figure displays the average values (1-10 scale) of five trustworthiness indices –Integrity and Anti-corruption, Competence and Effectiveness, Impartiality / Public-interest, Procedural Reliability – across Italian NUTS-2 regions. Each panel reports a bar plot of regional means with a red dashed line indicating the national average for the corresponding index.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

worthiness, while the 40-54 cohort consistently reports the lowest expectations – a pattern echoing midlife dissatisfaction documented in European democracies (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). This U-shaped age pattern is consistent with life-cycle expectations and varying exposures to institutional performance over time.

Regional variation (NUTS-2) exhibits a more complex geography that only partially aligns with a North-South divide (Fig. 5.5): higher scores concentrate in the Northeast (Bolzano, Trento, Friuli-Venezia Giulia) and in selected cases in the Centre-South (Abruzzo, Campania), while several regions – including Basilicata and Calabria – register lower trustworthiness, though the territorial disparities are less pronounced than those observed for institutional trust.

Overall, Italy's position in the European trustworthiness landscape reflects a medium-trust, low-sanctioning, weak-procedural-reliability configuration, in which pessimism about elite ethics is shared Europe-wide, but concerns about the credibility of sanctions, media accuracy, and bureaucratic safeguards are distinctly more acute in Italy, situating the country within a structurally fragile trustworthiness regime.

5.5. Normative trustworthiness

Normative trustworthiness captures the prescriptive standards – ethical, procedural, and relational – that citizens expect political actors to embody to be deemed trustworthy.

A first entry point into citizens' normative expectations of trustworthiness is offered by the item-level distribution of q35_1-q35_15, which asks respondents whether each of fifteen attributes is important for deciding whether to trust a person or a political actor. These items encompass ethical, professional, procedural, democratic, and identity-based dimensions.

Table 5.3 reports the weighted proportions of Italians selecting each criterion ("Yes"), alongside the EU average. The Italian pattern reveals a remarkably coherent hierarchy of normative priorities: moral integrity and anti-corruption considerations dominate the hierarchy, followed by competence and consistency in public statements, while procedural-democratic expectations rank substantially lower. In contrast, the Italian sample only marginally endorses identity similarity and partisan or ideological proximity.

This general architecture is largely shared across Europe, but with meaningful accentuations in the Italian case: Italians display a stronger emphasis on integrity, anti-corruption, and relational accountability, and a comparatively weaker emphasis on democratic rule adherence.

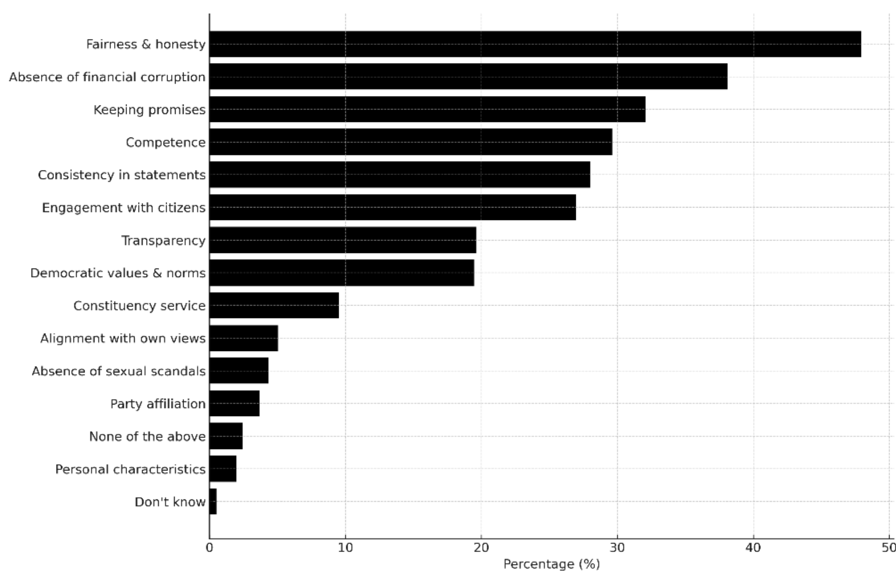
Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Tab. 5.3 - Normative trustworthiness items (q35_1-q35_15): Italy and EU (%)

Item	**Italy (%)**	**EU excl-IT (%)**	**Δ IT-EU**
q35_1 - Keeping promises	32.1	42.1	–10.0
q35_2 - Consistency in statements	28.0	17.8	+10.2
q35_3 - Transparency	19.6	22.7	–3.0
q35_4 - Competence	29.6	35.3	–5.7
q35_5 - Serving own constituency	9.5	11.0	–1.5
q35_6 - Similar political views	5.0	8.0	–3.0
q35_7 - Democratic values and norms	19.4	27.2	–7.8
q35_8 - Same political party	3.7	5.3	–1.6
q35_9 - No financial corruption	38.1	26.9	+11.2
q35_10 - No sexual scandals	4.3	6.7	–2.4
q35_11 - Engages with citizens	27.0	19.1	+7.9
q35_12 - Fair and honest	48.0	42.5	+5.5
q35_13 - Personal characteristics	2.0	3.5	–1.5
q35_14 - None of the above	2.4	1.2	+1.2
q35_15 - Don't know	0.5	1.2	–0.7

Note: proportions are weighted using TRUEDEM national weights; EU excludes Italy.

Fig. 5.6 - Normative trustworthiness priorities in Italy (weighted percentages)



The figure displays the weighted percentage of Italian respondents selecting each criterion as essential for judging the trustworthiness of politicians (q35).

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

The Italian public ranks ethical and anti-corruption criteria at the top of the trustworthiness hierarchy (Fig. 5.6). *"Being fair and honest"* emerges as the single most important criterion (48%), followed by *no financial corruption* (38%) and *keeping promises* (32%). Competence also scores relatively high (30%), but not as prominently as moral-probity items.

R*especting democratic rules* does not rank among the top criteria (19%), placing Italy below the EU average on this dimension. Overall, these results indicate that Italians articulate particularly demanding expectations of moral integrity, anti-corruption probity, and personal coherence, rather than a general emphasis on democratic rule adherence. This pattern accords with long-standing findings in corruption studies and comparative political culture: lower institutional trust often coexists with higher normative demands for integrity and ethical conduct (Rothstein and Teorell, 2008; Bauhr and Charron, 2018).

A second cluster focusses on consistency and relational accountability: *being consistent in public statements* (28%) and *engaging with citizens* (27%). Italians rank both dimensions above the EU average, suggesting heightened expectations of communicative reliability and responsiveness – features highlighted in contemporary theories of democratic legitimacy and everyday accountability (Warren, 2017).

By contrast, identity-based proximity – such as sharing a political party, similar preferences, or a common social background – remains marginal. Only 3-5% of Italians consider these attributes important, and less so than Europeans overall. Notably, just 3.7% of Italians believe that sharing a political party is important for trust.

This finding challenges stereotypes of Italian particularism as identity-driven: rather than privileging in-group similarity, Italians anchor trustworthiness in universalistic ethical standards rather than partisan or socio-demographic affinity.

Finally, criteria related to scandals or misconduct show a differentiated profile. Italians attribute slightly less importance than the EU average to *avoiding sexual scandals* (4%), but significantly more importance to *avoiding financial corruption* (+11 points compared to the EU excl. Italy). This indicates that financial integrity, rather than private moral behaviour, is perceived as a more politically consequential and meaningful basis for trust.

To provide an analytically tractable structure of citizens' normative expectations of political trustworthiness, the fifteen dichotomous items of q35 were aggregated into four theoretically grounded indices. The construction procedure respects the nature of the variables, which are dummy (Yes/No) indicators rather than ordinal scales. For each conceptual do-

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

main, a composite was created by calculating, at the respondent level, the proportion of items selected within that domain (e.g., selecting two out of four integrity items yields a score of 0.50). These respondent-level proportions were then aggregated using the survey weights through a weighted mean, producing indices on a 0-100 scale that represent the *average share of criteria deemed important* within each domain. This procedure aligns with best practices for multiple-response items in comparative survey research (e.g., ESS, Eurobarometer, QoG).

The four indices reflect distinct and well-established dimensions of trustworthiness drawn from the ABI model (Mayer et al. 1995), the Quality of Government tradition (Rothstein and Teorell 2008), and recent theories of democratic accountability (Warren 2017). The Moral Integrity Index groups items on honesty, avoiding corruption, keeping promises, and being consistent (q35_12, q35_9, q35_1, q35_2). This shows the classical "integrity" part of trustworthiness. The Competence and Procedural Reliability Index combines competence, transparency, and rule-following (q35_4, q35_3, q35_7), reflecting expectations of ability and adherence to procedural norms. The Accountability and Responsiveness Index aggregates engagement with citizens and constituency service (q35_11, q35_5), capturing relational accountability. Finally, the Identity–Proximity Index groups partisan, ideological, and social-similarity criteria (q35_8, q35_6, q35_13), corresponding to proximity-based trust.

The resulting scores reveal a sharply differentiated normative structure. Moral integrity is by far the most salient dimension for Italians (36.5 on a 0-100 scale), exceeding the EU average. Italians are thus more demanding than other Europeans in expecting political actors to be honest, consistent, and free of corruption – confirming longstanding findings in political culture and corruption studies: contexts of low political trust tend to produce heightened moral expectations toward officeholders (Rothstein and Teorell, 2008; Bauhr and Charron, 2018).

In contrast, competence and procedural reliability (22.9 vs. 28.4 in the EU, excluding Italy) play a comparatively weaker role in structuring Italian evaluations, suggesting a normative orientation that prioritises moral probity over procedural or performance-based assessments.

The accountability and responsiveness dimension (18.2) ranks third and is more prominent in Italy than in Europe overall. The Italians place a higher value on availability, contact, and constituency engagement – an interpretation consistent with theories of everyday accountability and citizen-centered democratic expectations (Warren, 2017). Conversely, identity-based proximity is marginal (3.6), even less relevant than in the EU. Italians do not seem to base trustworthiness on shared social traits, ideological

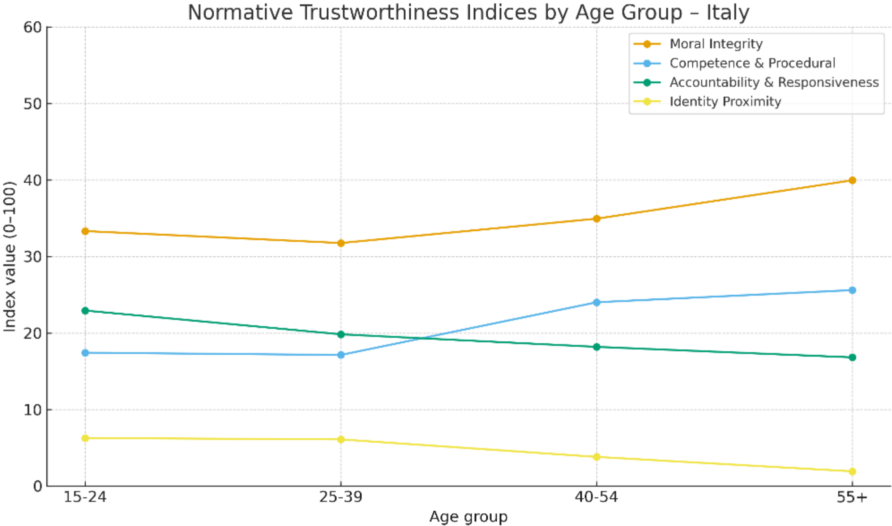
Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

closeness, or partisan loyalty. Instead, they mostly rely on universal ethical standards.

Taken together, these composite indices reveal a normative landscape dominated by integrity, supported by modest emphasis on competence and accountability, and almost entirely devoid of identity-based criteria. This structure mirrors Italy's broader pattern of high normative expectations and low institutional trust, where political trustworthiness is primarily judged through the lens of ethical behaviour rather than performance or proximity.

The four composite indices display meaningful socio-demographic variation. With respect to age, moral integrity expectations increase steadily across cohorts, peaking among older adults (39.9), while competence- and rule-related criteria follow a similar upward gradient, suggesting that older Italians rely more heavily on ethical and procedural benchmarks when evaluating trustworthiness. Younger respondents, on the other hand, place a higher value on accountability and responsiveness (22.9 among 15-24-year-olds), which suggests that participatory and relational cues are more effective with younger adults. Identity-based proximity declines sharply with age, reaching minimal values among respondents aged 55+, confirming that interpersonal similarity plays only a marginal role in normative assessments and becomes even less relevant among older citizens (Fig. 5.7).

Fig. 5.7 - Normative Trustworthiness Indices by Age Group (Weighted, 0-100)



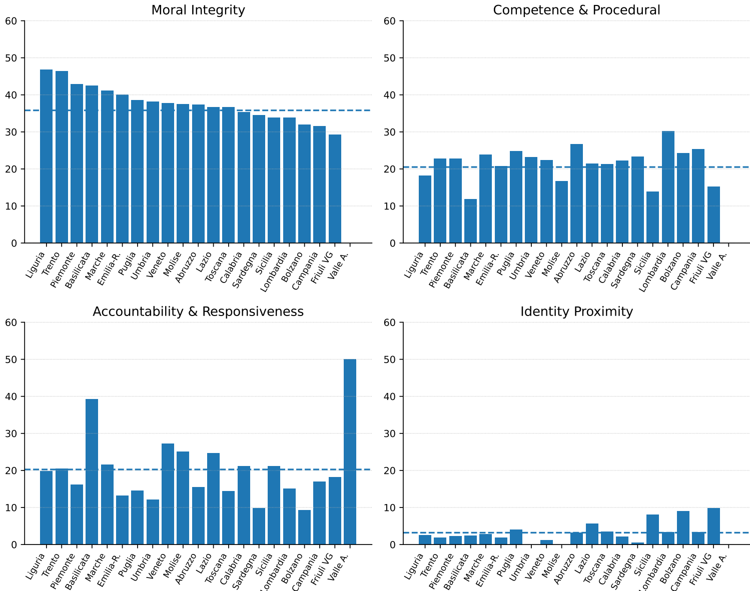
This figure displays the variation of four composite indices of normative political trustworthiness across four age cohorts (15-24, 25-39, 40-54, 55+).

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Gender differences are modest but structured. Men tend to emphasise moral integrity more strongly (37.7 vs. 35.4), while women attribute slightly greater importance to competence and procedural reliability (24.0 vs. 21.7). These patterns are consistent with prior findings showing gendered orientations toward institutional performance and communicative expectations, yet the magnitude of the gap remains small.

Territorial variation across NUTS-2 regions follows a familiar North–South pattern. Regions with higher administrative capacity and stronger civic traditions – such as Emilia-Romagna, Trentino-Alto Adige, and parts of the Northwest – score higher on both the moral and procedural indices (integrity and competence), while several southern regions display lower levels (Fig. 5.8).

Fig. 5.8 - Normative Trustworthiness Indices by Italian NUTS-2 Region (Weighted, 0-100)



This figure reports the weighted mean values of four composite indices of normative political trustworthiness – Moral Integrity, Competence and Procedural Reliability, Accountability and Responsiveness, and Identity Proximity – across Italian NUTS-2 regions.

Accountability-responsiveness shows a more mixed geography, with higher scores in central and north-eastern regions and lower ones in parts of the Mezzogiorno. Identity-based proximity remains low everywhere, with only slightly higher values in southern regions. Overall, these socio-

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

demographic and territorial gradients reinforce the broader picture of Italy as a polity where universalistic ethical expectations dominate, while competence, responsiveness and identity-based cues vary selectively across age and regional lines.

To relate normative expectations to perceived institutional performance, we compare the normative trustworthiness indices with the perceived trustworthiness indices.

By computing a weighted expectation-evaluation gap for comparable moral, competence and procedural dimensions, we can approximate the distance between the qualities citizens require from political actors and those they attribute to existing institutions. Although not a perfect one-to-one mapping, this parallel structure offers a meaningful heuristic for analysing how ideals and perceived performance interact in shaping democratic legitimacy.

The resulting patterns suggest that discrepancies between expectations and evaluations are not uniform but structured across social groups and territorial contexts. Age differences are particularly indicative: younger cohorts tend to display larger negative gaps, especially in competence and procedural reliability, while older adults show narrower discrepancies and, in some cases, alignment in moral integrity. These gradients are consistent with theories of generational change and "critical citizenship", which posit that younger individuals combine stronger democratic aspirations with greater scepticism toward institutional performance (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Gender differences appear comparatively modest, echoing prior research showing that gendered orientations toward political trust are domain-specific and typically small (Newton and Zmerli, 2011). Territorial variation, finally, reveals a complex geography of trustworthiness: regions characterised by stronger administrative capacity and robust civic infrastructures tend to exhibit smaller expectation-performance gaps, whereas areas with historically weaker institutions show more pronounced discrepancies. This aligns with long-standing findings on the territorial embeddedness of institutional performance and civic cultures in Italy (Putnam, 1993; Cartocci, 2007; Trigilia, 2005).

Taken together, these patterns point to a socially and territorially differentiated structure of trustworthiness assessments. Rather than a uniformly disappointed public, the data suggest a more nuanced configuration in which different groups hold varying normative standards and perceive institutional performance in distinct ways. The analysis reinforces the idea that democratic legitimacy depends not only on the level of institutional performance but also on the degree to which it aligns with the moral, procedural and competence-based expectations of citizens. In this sense, the expectation–evaluation gap becomes a key mechanism linking micro-level

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

orientations with broader dynamics of political trust and perceived institutional quality (Levi and Stoker, 2000; Scharpf, 1999).

5.6. Trustworthiness and trust

Understanding the relationship between citizens' normative expectations of institutional behaviour and their perceptions of how institutions actually perform is crucial for explaining variations in political trust. In line with established work on democratic legitimacy and evaluative orientations (Warren, 2017), we measure two distinct but interrelated components: *normative trustworthiness expectations*, derived from ethical, competence-based and rule-orientated criteria (q35_1-q35_15), and *perceived institutional trustworthiness*, assessed through integrity, competence, impartiality, and procedural-reliability items (q26-q34). Both dimensions were scaled 0-100 and converted into overall indices: the *Normative Trustworthiness Index* (nine universalistic criteria, excluding identity-based items) and the *Perceived Trustworthiness Index* (nine items, with bribe rejection reverse-coded). For each Italian respondent, we then constructed a congruence typology by dichotomising the two indices at their weighted medians, following methodological conventions used in studies of attitude-performance congruence and demand-support alignment (Dalton, 2004; Klingemann, 1999). This produced a theory-grounded fourfold classification capturing the interaction between what citizens *expect* and what they *perceive* institutions to deliver.

The resulting types represent four meaningful citizen–institution configurations.

1. *Satisfied demanders* (33% of the Italian sample): citizens with high normative standards and high perceived performance, expressing comparatively elevated confidence across political, social, supranational and interpersonal trust spheres.
2. *Critical citizens* (38% of the sample): individuals holding demanding normative criteria but low perceived performance, a profile consistent with the global rise of "critical citizens" who support democratic principles yet express deep scepticism toward institutional performance (Norris, 1999; Dalton, 2004). These respondents display the lowest political and supranational trust, despite maintaining moderate out-group trust and high in-group trust.
3. *Resigned/alienated citizens* (11%): respondents with low expectations and low performance assessments, echoing classical models of political alienation and disengagement (Rosenberg, 1954). Trust levels are uniformly low, and normative minimalism coexists with pessimistic evaluations – suggesting withdrawal rather than protest.

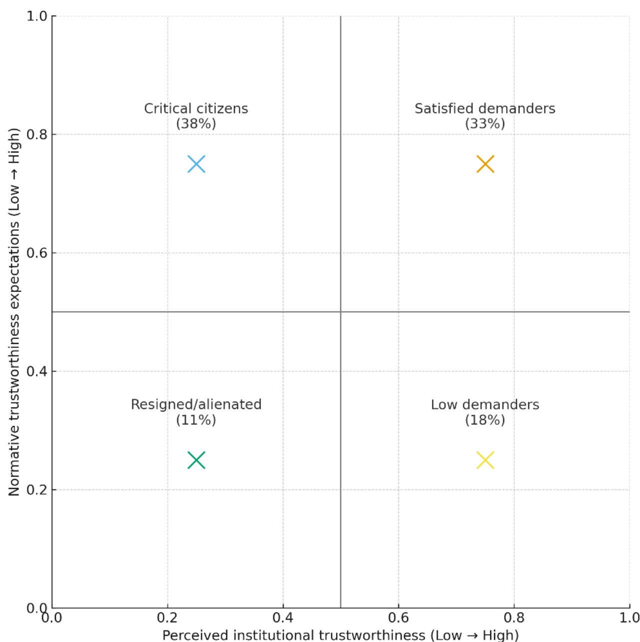
Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

4. *Low-demanders* (18%): people who have low normative standards but think they do well, showing high trust in both social and institutional settings. This profile aligns with low-demand, high-diffuse-support orientations described in legitimacy studies (Levi and Stoker, 2000).

This typology thus distinguishes not only between "high" and "low" trust but also between different combinations of expectations and evaluations, opening up a more nuanced interpretation of trust outcomes.

A conceptual map of the typology (Fig. 5.9) situates respondents along two axes – normative expectations and perceived performance – highlighting both the theoretical relationships between types and their empirical distribution in Italy. The figure shows that Italian citizens are not uniformly distrustful; rather, they cluster into two large, normatively engaged groups (satisfied demanders and critical citizens), a significant minority of trusting low-demanders, and a smaller alienated segment.

Fig. 5.9 - Typology based on normative expectations and perceived trustworthiness (Italy, weighted %)

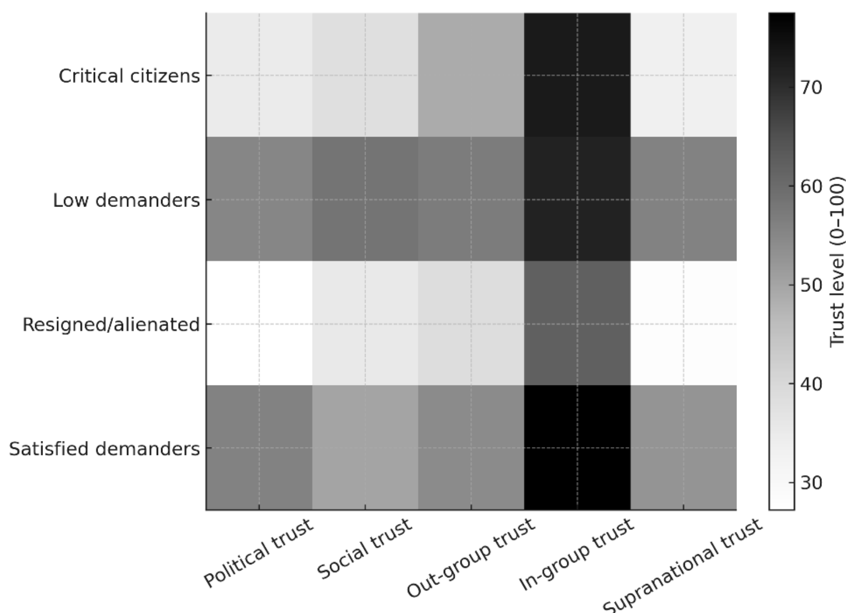


The figure displays a two-dimensional classification of citizens according to their normative expectations of institutional behaviour (vertical axis) and their evaluations of perceived institutional trustworthiness (horizontal axis). The resulting four quadrants represent distinct congruence types: *Satisfied demanders* (high expectations, high perceived performance), *Critical citizens* (high expectations, low performance), *Resigned/alienated* (low expectations, low performance), and *Low demanders* (low expectations, high performance). Weighted percentages reported in the text illustrate the empirical distribution of these types within the Italian population.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Turning to trust profiles, each type exhibits a distinctive pattern across the five trust indices (political, social, out-group, in-group, and supranational) (see Fig. 5.10). Satisfied demanders occupy the highest levels of political and supranational trust among all groups, reflecting alignment between norms and performance. Critical citizens, by contrast, show sharp deficits in political and EU-level trust – indicating that institutional trust erodes when demanding normative expectations are unmet – yet maintain moderate social and out-group trust and strong in-group ties. Resigned/alienated citizens record the lowest trust levels across all dimensions, consistent with withdrawal rather than evaluative critique. Finally, low demanders mirror satisfied demanders in their overall trust structure but from a very different normative base: they trust institutions because they hold them to undemanding criteria, not because they meet high standards. These results align with theoretical arguments that political trust depends not only on performance but also on the fit between performance and expectations (Levi and Stoker, 2000).

Fig. 5.10 - Heatmap of trust profiles by type (Italy)



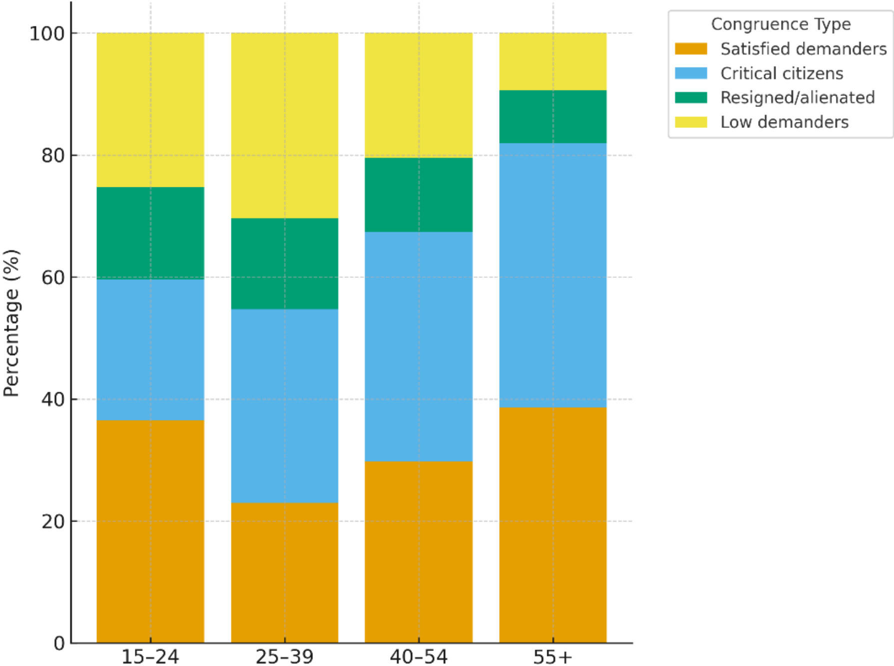
The heatmap displays the weighted mean levels (0-100) of five trust dimensions – political, social, out-group, in-group, and supranational trust – across the four congruence types derived from the interaction between normative expectations and perceived institutional trustworthiness. Darker shading corresponds to higher trust levels.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Socio-demographic patterns further contextualise these types. Age cleavages are particularly pronounced. Older respondents (55+) constitute the largest share of both satisfied demanders and critical citizens, suggesting that normatively engaged orientations intensify over the life cycle and that mid-to-late adulthood is associated with heightened sensitivity to institutional shortcomings – consistent with evidence of midlife democratic dissatisfaction in Europe (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Younger respondents (15-24), in contrast, are disproportionately represented among low-demanders, indicating comparatively lower normative demands paired with more favourable institutional perceptions (Fig. 5.11).

Gender differences are more modest: women are slightly over-represented among critical citizens, consistent with research showing that women often adopt stricter ethical and accountability-based standards in evaluating institutions. Men show a marginally higher probability of belonging to the trusting low-demanders.

Fig. 5.11 - Types by Age Group (Weighted 100% Stacked Bars)



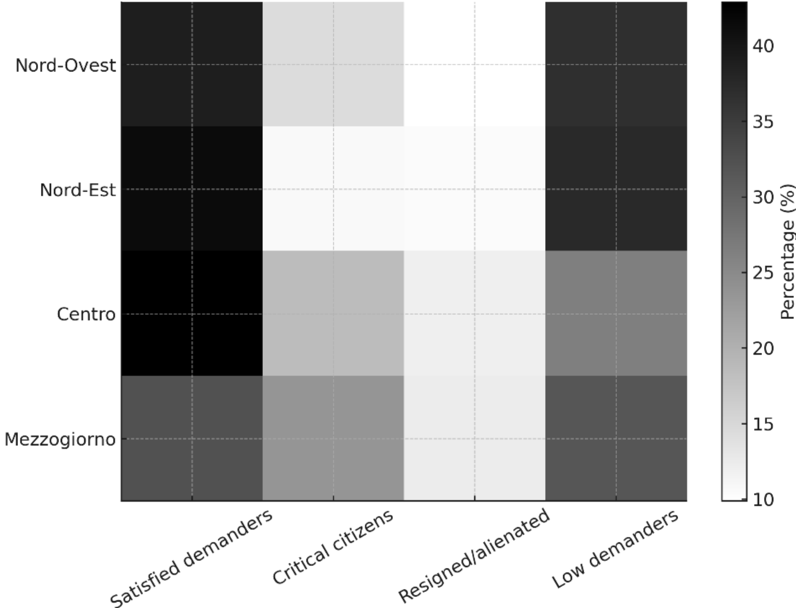
This figure displays the weighted distribution of the four congruence types – *Satisfied demanders*, *Critical citizens*, *Resigned/alienated*, and *Low demanders* – across Italian age groups (15-24, 25-39, 40-54, 55+).

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Geographically, the typology reflects Italy's territorial political cultures (Fig. 5.12). Southern Italy shows both a concentration of critical citizens and low demanders, revealing a pattern consistent with the coexistence of high civic norms and low institutional performance in parts of Southern Europe (Trigilia, 2005; Cartocci, 2007). The Northwestern and the Central areas show higher shares of satisfied demanders, reflecting better perceived administrative performance and historically stronger civic infrastructures. The resigned/alienated type is more common in the Mezzogiorno, which is a sign of long-standing differences in the state's ability to keep its promises and follow its same rules (Charron, Lapuente, and Rothstein, 2013).

Taken together, the typology reveals that trust outcomes in Italy cannot be interpreted merely as a function of institutional performance. Instead, they emerge from the interaction between what citizens expect and what they perceive – a dynamic that produces pronounced differences in political trust and varies meaningfully across social groups and territories. These findings underscore the value of integrating normative and evaluative congruence into comparative analyses of trust, moving beyond unidimensional accounts of performance or diffuse support.

Fig. 5.12 - Types Across Italian Macro-Areas (Weighted Percentage Heatmap)



The heatmap reports the weighted percentage distribution of the four congruence types across Italy's macro-areas – Nord-Ovest, Nord-Est, Centro, and Mezzogiorno. Darker shading indicates higher prevalence.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Concluding remarks

The analyses above indicate that trust, perceived trustworthiness, and normative expectations in Italy are part of a complex and stratified framework rather than a homogeneous syndrome of democratic malaise. From a sociological perspective, these orientations reflect not only evaluations of institutional performance but also deeper cultural schemas, life-course trajectories, and regionally embedded historical legacies. Echoing classical theories of trust as a mechanism for reducing social complexity (Simmel, 1990; Luhmann, 1979), the findings indicate that Italians rely simultaneously on interpersonal anchors, moralised expectations of public authority, and culturally sedimented narratives about the state and its capacities.

Three macro-patterns emerge clearly.

First, political and institutional trust in Italy remains structurally fragile, but it is not uniformly low. Citizens express strong and consistent confidence in their primary social ties – family and, to a slightly lesser degree, neighbours – confirming the persistence of bonding forms of solidarity that scholars have long identified as central to Italian civic morphology (Banfield, 1958; Putnam, 1993). This relational embeddedness coexists with comparatively weaker trust in social, political, and supranational institutions, particularly where responsibilities for regulation, control, and redistribution are concerned. The territorial cleavages documented here – higher trust in the North and centre, lower trust in parts of the Mezzogiorno – also mirror longstanding regional variations in administrative capacity, civic infrastructures, and state-citizen relations (Trigilia, 2005; Cartocci, 2007). Generational gradients further complicate this picture: younger Italians express higher social and supranational trust but also heightened evaluative scrutiny, pointing toward a form of critical cosmopolitanism consistent with late-modern theories of reflexive citizenship (Giddens, 1990; Beck, 1992; Norris and Inglehart, 2019).

Second, perceived institutional trustworthiness reveals that Italian scepticism is most acute not in moral integrity – where Italy aligns with European averages – but in the domains of procedural reliability and sanctioning capacity. On average, Italians do not simply doubt the ethics of public officeholders; rather, they express deep concern about the credibility of institutional safeguards, the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms, and the reliability of information and administrative procedures. These deficits resonate with a sociological understanding of trustworthiness as grounded in systemic properties – rule-following, transparency, fair treatment, and predictability – rather than individual morality alone (Rothstein and Teorell, 2008; Warren, 2017). The Italian case thus reflects a wider

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

European configuration in which expectations of moral integrity are high across societies, but confidence in procedural fairness and enforcement varies dramatically.

Third, normative trustworthiness contributes an essential interpretive layer. Italians articulate demanding ethical expectations – honesty, fairness, avoidance of corruption – but comparatively weaker expectations concerning democratic rule adherence or competence. Contrary to stereotypes of particularism, identity-based criteria (shared social background, similar political preferences, partisan proximity) are virtually irrelevant. This normative structure suggests that Italians evaluate institutional actors through universalistic moral codes rather than through socio-political affinity, a pattern that complicates familiar diagnoses of Italian political culture. At the same time, age and territorial differences reveal that these moral expectations are not equally distributed. Older citizens prioritise integrity and procedural reliability more strongly, whereas younger Italians place somewhat more emphasis on accountability and responsiveness.

Bringing these three domains together, the congruence typology demonstrates that trust outcomes in Italy are shaped not only by levels of perceived performance but also by the alignment, or misalignment, between what citizens expect and what they believe institutions deliver. The coexistence of two large normatively engaged groups – satisfied demanders and critical citizens – highlights that Italian distrust is often evaluative rather than diffuse, rooted in the gap between aspirations for ethical, reliable institutions and perceived systemic shortcomings. A sizeable group of low-demanders – citizens who express trust without holding demanding expectations – adds nuance to interpretations of institutional trust, suggesting that high trust does not always signal strong legitimacy but may reflect lower normative baselines. Meanwhile, the resigned/alienated minority recalls classical theories of political estrangement, where minimal expectations intersect with uniformly low evaluations.

Taken together, these findings support a sociological interpretation of trust as a relational and culturally mediated orientation, shaped by normative frameworks, lived experiences, and the institutional opportunities and constraints embedded in different territories and life stages. They invite us to move beyond deficit narratives and recognise that Italy's "medium-low trust regime" is highly differentiated. It contains both demanding democratic publics and pockets of disengagement, both high normative expectations and structural performance deficits, and both universalistic moral codes and persistent territorial inequalities.

From a broader theoretical standpoint, the Italian case underscores that democratic legitimacy in late-modern societies depends less on per-

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

formance alone and more on the fit between performance and citizens' normative expectations – a dynamic already anticipated in classical sociology but becoming increasingly central in today's complex democracies. The implication is that trust enhancement strategies must address not only institutional outputs but also procedural reliability, transparency, and responsiveness – dimensions that citizens use to navigate risk, complexity, and uncertainty in contemporary governance systems. In this regard, TRUEDEM findings on Italy enhance a broader European and global discourse regarding the mechanisms through which democratic institutions gain, lose, and possibly regain the trust of reflexive, discerning, and socially integrated citizens.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Conclusions

by Domenico Fruncillo and Domenico Maddaloni

At the end of this journey through the results of the TRUEDEM research, we would first like to point out that the amount of data we have collected is much greater than we have been able to discuss in the limited space of this volume. Indeed, we hope to deepen our analysis of the relationship between politics and civil society in Italy in the near future. Nevertheless, we believe that this first volume offers considerable food for thought both in relation to the analysis of Italian democracy and to the construction of a more comprehensive theoretical framework for contemporary democratic political systems. We dedicate our concluding remarks to these two topics.

Trust in Italy: A perfect storm of distance, demand and deficit

Through multiple methodological lenses and actor-centered perspectives, this volume has shown that Italy presents a case for political trust that defies simplistic narratives of democratic decline. As we have seen more specifically in Chapter 5, the country is not experiencing a monolithic crisis of legitimacy but rather a complex combination of institutional distance, demanding normative expectations, and inadequate accountability mechanisms. This situation creates a unique environment where sceptical citizens, self-referential elites, and intermediary organisations operate on parallel paths that rarely intersect. The TRUEDEM data do not suggest a populist revolt against democracy, as often portrayed in public discourse, but a more paradoxical phenomenon: Italians maintain strong diffuse support for the constitutional architecture of their republic while expressing profound distrust in the actors who inhabit it and the practices through which it functions. This disjuncture between system-level legitimacy and

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

actor-level distrust constitutes the central analytical challenge that has guided our investigation.

The first pillar of this storm is *distance* – not merely geographical, but symbolic, structural, and relational (Isernia, Martini and Verzichelli, 2024). Focus group participants across all educational and age cohorts articulated a sense of political remoteness that begins at the local level but metastasises as representation chains extend upward (see Chapter 3). As the participants observed, the Italian political system resembles a "telephone game" in which the citizen's voice becomes progressively distorted as it moves from municipality to region, from parliament to the European Council. This vertical distance is compounded by what we might term psychological invisibility: citizens distrust parliamentarians because they are unknown, unidentifiable, and unreachable through direct contact. The blunt admission by Francesca – "I can't have trust in the parliamentarian because I don't even know the parliamentarian" – captures a fundamental breakdown in the principal-agent relationship that Norris's model (Norris, 2018, 2022) assumes as functional.

Yet distance operates differently across institutional levels. Our qualitative interviews with politicians (see Chapter 1) and CSO leaders (see Chapter 2) consistently identified local government as a residual trust reservoir, the only arena where proximity still enables direct experience and visible outcomes. As one national-level politician noted, municipalities remain the only ones who do something that citizens can see immediately (Pol17). However, decades of party system transformation have eroded this territorial anchoring. The disappearance of local party sections – once crucial sites of political socialisation and mediation – has severed the connective tissue between citizens and the political class, replacing ideological loyalty with media-driven image politics (Fiorenza, FG4). The result is a cultural distance that young citizens experience as total alienation from a professional elite that appears to "do theatre" rather than represent their interests.

If distance describes the supply-side failure of Italian democracy, the second pillar – *demand* – reveals citizens as demanding evaluators of political trustworthiness. The quantitative analysis of normative expectations in Chapter 5 demonstrates that Italians do not withdraw into cynicism. Instead, they express a strict moral code that politicians regularly break. Indeed, 48% of respondents identify "being fair and honest" as the essential criterion for trust, while 38% prioritise "no financial corruption" – both figures significantly exceeding European averages. This moralisation of trust reflects what Rothstein and Teorell (2008) referred to as the "quality of government" imperative. In contexts where procedural fairness is uncer-

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

tain, citizens fall back on integrity as the only visible and verifiable dimension of trustworthiness.

Crucially, these expectations are universalistic, not particularistic. Contrary to stereotypes of Italian clientelism, our data show that identity-based criteria – shared party affiliation, similar political views, common social background – are rejected by over 95% of citizens. Italians favour representatives who demonstrate consistency, transparency, and ethical coherence over those who share similar social or cultural traits. The problem is that perceived institutional behaviours fall catastrophically short of these standards. The gap is most pronounced in procedural reliability: while Europeans moderately trust that ministers will resign after misusing public funds (EU mean = 4.38/10), Italians express profound scepticism (3.59). Here, the demand for accountability confronts a demonstrated deficit in enforcement, producing what we can term unwarranted distrust – not because institutions perform worse than elsewhere in absolute terms, but because they fail to meet exceptionally high domestic expectations of moral probity.

The third pillar – the *deficit* – appears in the divergence between formal democratic innovations and their experiential realities. Leaders of civil society organisations describe a landscape characterised by "tired rituals", where participatory processes consume resources without yielding results, and where individuals express their opinions and then clearly take a different stance (see Chapter 2). This participatory fatigue is not a rejection of deliberation per se but a learnt response to what Pateman theorised as "pseudo-participation" – institutional mechanisms that simulate inclusion while preserving elite monopolies over decision-making (Pateman, 1970).

Politicians themselves exhibit ambivalence, verging on scepticism, toward democratic innovations (Isernia, Martini and Verzichelli, 2024; see Chapter 1). While some recognise the potential of citizens' assemblies and co-design, macro-level elites especially view them as "window dressing" (Pol. 18), which risks creating "an opportunity for citizens to make comments that are probably not even read". Citizens' withdrawal into individualised responsibilities mirrors this elite distrust of participation. When asked who should address societal problems, some focus group participants answer "ourselves" (see Chapter 4). Annarita's perspective – that "the first to have to change are the citizens" – reflects a profound reconfiguration in which collective problems become private duties. This individualisation, while empowering in some contexts, ultimately absolves institutions of their democratic function, transforming structural failures into personal obligations.

What makes this storm particularly destructive is the epistemological gap between actors. Politicians and civil servants, operating within

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

what Bourdieu (2003) would term the habitus of institutional power, tend to locate the crisis externally: in citizens' "functional illiteracy", in media polarisation, or in the "moody" volatility of public opinion (Pol01) (see Chapter 1). Citizens and leaders of civil society organisations, who are on the receiving end of power, point to problems within the elite, such as corruption scandals and the growing gap between election promises and actual achievements" (see Chapters 2 and 3). This mutual blindness prevents the formation of a shared diagnostic frame and blocks the emergence of a common reform agenda.

The typology of congruence between normative demands and perceived performance developed in Chapter 5 highlights these divergent positions. Italy's population is divided into two main groups: "critical citizens" (38%), who have high moral standards but think institutions are failing, and "satisfied demanders" (33%), whose evaluations meet their needs. The resigned/alienated group is still small (11%), which means that most Italians are still normatively engaged and haven't given up. Yet this engagement is politically fragile, as it expresses itself more through abstention-as-protest – "the largest party is abstentionism" (Pol18) – than through active participation (Diamanti, 2014; Fruncillo, 2004, 2023; Metye and Tuorto, 2025).

The storm's intensity varies geographically. The North-South divide documented throughout this volume is not merely a performance gap but a legitimacy gradient. Southern regions like Campania and Calabria exhibit not only lower institutional trust but also higher concentrations of disillusioned citizens, while northern regions (such as Trentino, Lombardy, or Veneto) show more satisfied demanders. This geography reflects what Putnam theorised as divergent "civic traditions" (Putnam, 1993) but is updated for the post-1992 era. Northern regions benefit from residual social capital and more efficient administrations, while the South experiences a double deficit of institutional capacity and elite credibility. The Salerno focus groups' emphasis on historical grievances – invoking Cavour's "theft" of southern resources – shows how trust deficits become sedimented in collective memory, transforming contemporary failures into confirmations of eternal abandonment.

Despite this bleak picture, the volume's findings contain a kernel of democratic optimism. The prevalence of sceptical trust – what Norris (2018, 2022) defines as deliberative decision-making based on conscious choices and logical reasoning – suggests that most Italian citizens are not anti-democratic but hyper-democratic in their expectations. Their distrust is not cynical but evaluative, based on a profound understanding of the difference between system legitimacy and actor performance. This creates an

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

opportunity: if institutions can reform their procedural reliability – making sanctions credible, feedback loops transparent, and participation consequential – they may convert disillusionment into the "trust but verify" orientation that Norris identifies as optimal for democratic health.

The challenge, as our data make clear, is that reform cannot come from within the political elite alone (Addeo, Fruncillo and Maddaloni, 2025). Politicians close to power centres view the system as functional, while those at the peripheries demand change but lack institutional leverage (see Chapter 1). Civil society organisations, despite their critical perspective, remain too often enlisted in "tired rituals" that exhaust rather than empower them (see Chapter 2). As we have seen in Chapter 4, the key to breaking this impasse could lie in reconfiguring the relationship between competence and democracy, not by rejecting technocracy but by politicising it – embedding experts within democratic processes where citizens and elected officials retain decision-making authority.

In conclusion, Italy's trust crisis is not terminal. It reflects a democracy caught between high normative aspirations and low institutional deliverability, between citizens' reflexive capacity for evaluation and elites' structural inability to provide verifiable performance. The path forward requires moving beyond the false dichotomy of technocratic efficiency versus democratic legitimacy toward a model of accountable complexity in which expertise serves politics, politics serves citizens, and citizens themselves become co-authors rather than mere evaluators of public decisions. Whether Italian institutions can navigate this perfect storm depends on their willingness to treat sceptical trust not as a threat but as the last remaining bridge between a demanding citizenry and a quite dysfunctional political class.

Beyond the principal-agent model: Toward a neo-institutionalist synthesis

The theoretical implications of TRUEDEM research on the Italian case are equally compelling. Pippa Norris's principal-agent model of sceptical trust, which has guided the entire project (Norris, 2018, 2022), has proven remarkably generative in diagnosing Italy's political condition. By foregrounding citizens' evaluative capacities and distinguishing sceptical trust from credulous affiliation or cynical mistrust, the model captures what our data repeatedly confirms: most Italians are neither passive victims of populist enchantment nor rational calculators of pure material interest. They are, in Norris's terms, reflexive evaluators who judge institutions against

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

standards of competence, integrity, and impartiality (see the Introduction). This theoretical lens illuminates why trust fluctuates with institutional performance while remaining anchored to democratic principles – a pattern evident in the coexistence of constitutional fidelity and elite distrust, documented throughout this volume.

Nevertheless, as the Italian case so vividly demonstrates, the principal-agent framework encounters structural limits when applied to contexts where the institutional architecture itself is in flux and where informal practices systematically subvert formal rules. The model assumes a relatively stable chain of delegation, clear mechanisms for accountability, and a shared information environment – conditions that Italy's post-1992 political system has consistently failed to provide (Bicchieri, Mudambi, and Navarra, 2005; see also the Introduction). When our focus group participants describe representation as a "telephone game", they are not merely complaining about poor communication; they are exposing a deformation of the principal-agent relationship itself, where multiple principals (citizens, parties, European institutions) and multiple agents (technocrats, local politicians, party officials) operate without clear hierarchical oversight or sanctioning mechanisms. In such contexts, rational choice theories of trust risk becoming descriptively accurate but explanatorily thin: they tell us that citizens withdraw trust when performance fails, but they cannot fully account for why performance fails so systematically or why certain institutional equilibria persist despite widespread dissatisfaction.

This limitation points toward the necessity of integrating the principal-agent model with neo-institutionalist perspectives that foreground historical legacies, path-dependent trajectories, and the co-existence of competing institutional logics (Hall and Taylor, 1996; Streeck and Thelen, 2005; Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). Italy's chronic trust deficit cannot be understood without reference to what political scientists have termed the "Second Republic's institutional layering": the accumulation of reforms (electoral system changes, alternating technocratic and partisan governments, and EU conditionality) that have created not a coherent new system but a patchwork of partially overlapping, often contradictory rules. This layering produces what Streeck and Thelen identify as "institutional ambiguity", where actors can strategically invoke different rules to justify contradictory behaviours (Streeck and Thelen, 2005). When a politician can simultaneously claim to represent constituents, obey party directives, and comply with EU technical requirements, the very notion of accountability – central to Norris's model – becomes conceptually muddled and practically unenforceable.

A neo-institutionalist synthesis demands that we take seriously Italy's institutional memory and its embedding in what Pierre Rosanvallon calls

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

the "society of distrust" (Rosanvallon, 2008). The quantitative data shows that 38% of Italians prioritise "no financial corruption" as the key trustworthiness criterion – 11 points above the EU average – and cannot be reduced to individual risk aversion. It reflects a historically sedimented expectation forged through decades of *Tangentopoli*, *Mafia Capitale*, and recurring corruption scandals that have made integrity not one virtue among others but the litmus test of institutional legitimacy. We tend to think that such confidence is not sceptical trust (or mistrust) in Norris's rationalist sense; it is wounded trust, bearing the scars of repeated betrayal. The fact that Italians perceive ministers' resignation after misusing funds as highly unlikely (3.59/10 versus 4.38 EU average: see Chapter 5) is not merely a performance evaluation; it is a cultural schema – a taken-for-granted assumption about how power operates, reinforced across generations through storytelling, media exposure, and direct experience.

This path dependency also explains the territorial stratification of trust documented in Chapter 5. The North-South divide is not simply a function of contemporary administrative efficiency (though that matters). It reflects divergent historical experiences of state formation and civic incorporation. Putnam's argument about civic traditions, often criticised as static, finds renewed validation in our data when understood not as an immutable culture but as institutional reproduction mechanisms. Northern regions where associative density remained high – despite party system collapse – continue to generate stronger institutional trust because civic infrastructures (voluntary associations, local media, and participatory traditions) provide alternative channels for monitoring and sanctioning elites. In the South, where these infrastructures are weaker and where the state has historically been experienced as extractive rather than protective, trust remains confined to primary solidarities. The result is a dual equilibrium: particularistic trust in the South, strained but functioning institutional trust in the North, and everywhere a capillary distrust of national political elites that transcends regional boundaries.

Perhaps the most significant neo-institutionalist correction to the principal-agent model concerns the role of informal institutions. Norris's framework operates within the formal constitution of democracy: elections, parliaments, and transparency laws. Yet, as decades of Italian political sociology have documented, the Italian system has long relied on clientelist exchange and party-mediated particularism to supplement – and often supplant – these formal mechanisms. Our data reveal how this shadow system continues to deform trust relationships. When politicians describe citizens as "fans" rather than rational principals (Pol14), they are acknowledging a relationship based on affective loyalty rather than evaluative judgement

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

(see Chapter 1). When CSO leaders say that participatory events are "low-yield" exercises (CSO07), they are showing how formal inclusion hides the real decision-making power that is concentrated in party backrooms and technocratic circles (see Chapter 2).

This informal-institutional dimension explains a crucial puzzle: why Italy's trust levels are low but stable. The principal-agent model would predict either a recovery of trust when performance improves or a spiral into cynicism when it does not. Instead, Italy shows what we might call adaptive distrust – a stable equilibrium where citizens expect little from national institutions, compensate through local networks and personalised solutions, and periodically channel frustration into ephemeral mobilisations (the Five Star Movement, then Brothers of Italy) that promise rupture but often end up reproducing the same institutional pathologies. This stability is the product of institutional complementarity: the informal mechanisms of clientelism and personalism absorb the shocks that would otherwise produce a systemic breakdown, while simultaneously preventing the consolidation of the transparent, accountable relationships upon which sceptical trust depends.

The synthesis we propose embeds Norris's model within institutional structures that shape how principals and agents interact. Sceptical trust remains a valuable descriptive category for how reflexive citizens behave, but its explanatory power is amplified when we recognise that institutional architectures enable or disable the very practices of verification and sanctioning that make scepticism democratically functional. In Italy, the architecture is configured to hinder these processes: electoral systems change too frequently to permit retrospective accountability; party fragmentation prevents clear programmatic alternatives; technocratic interludes suspend the principal-agent relationship altogether; and media fragmentation destroys the common information environment necessary for collective evaluation (Pasquino and Valbruzzi, 2010, 2015).

What would an enabling architecture look like? It would require institutional reforms that are not merely procedural but relational – designed to shorten the chains of representation, make sanctions credible, and ensure that participation produces tangible outcomes. This means:

1. Stabilising electoral rules to allow citizens to identify and reward/punish representatives;
2. Strengthening horizontal accountability by empowering oversight bodies with genuine sanctioning authority;
3. Institutionalising feedback loops in participatory processes, making co-design legally binding rather than consultative (Addeo, Fruncillo and Maddaloni, 2025);

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

4. Reforming media systems to combat the "functional illiteracy" that politicians rightly identify but wrongly blame solely on citizens.

These changes are very specific policy interventions that require a class of politicians willing to accept the unpopularity risks that our interviewees valued but seldom practiced. The neo-institutionalist perspective reminds us that such willingness cannot be assumed – it must be cultivated through institutional incentives that reward responsible governance over clientelist survival and media visibility.

Finally, integrating neo-institutionalism with the principal-agent model has broader implications beyond Italy. It suggests that the global trend toward democratic dissatisfaction documented by Norris and others (Norris, 1999, 2011, 2022; see also Norris and Inglehart, 2019) is not simply a product of rising expectations or cultural value change but of a mismatch between institutional designs inherited from the 20th century and the complexity demands of the 21st. The rise of technocracy, the personalisation of politics, the fragmentation of media, and the multiplication of governance levels (local, national, and supranational) have collectively fractured the principal-agent chain that modern representative democracy was built upon (Torcal and Montero, 2006; Torcal, 2017).

Italy exacerbates this global condition because its institutional plasticity – the frequency of reforms and adaptations – has made the fractures visible earlier and more dramatically than elsewhere. Studying Italy, therefore, offers not just a national case but a diagnostic window into pathologies that other democracies are beginning to experience. The Italian lesson is that sceptical trust, while normatively desirable, cannot flourish in institutional contexts that lack credible verification mechanisms and enforceable accountability. Without these, scepticism curdles into withdrawal, participation becomes ritual, and democratic legitimacy slowly erodes – not through revolutionary overthrow, but through the quiet normalisation of institutional distance (Martini and Quaranta, 2015).

In this sense, the Italian "snapshot" presented in this volume is both particular and paradigmatic. It challenges us to move beyond models that treat trust as a dependent variable of individual attitudes or performance metrics and toward a structural-relational theory that understands trust as the emergent property of historically grounded institutions, socially embedded norms, and politically constructed opportunities for participation. The task ahead is not to restore the mythical golden age of mass party democracy but to invent new institutional forms capable of making sceptical trust actionable rather than merely analytical.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

References

Aalberg T., and de Vreese C. H. (2017). Introduction: Comprehending Populist Political Communication. In T. Aalberg, F. Esser, C. Reinemann, J. Strömbäck, and C. H. de Vreese (eds.), *Populist Political Communication in Europe*. Routledge.

Accetti C. I., and Bickerton C. J. (2017). *Technocratic democracy: The entrenchment of technocratic governance in Europe*. Cambridge University Press.

Addeo F., Ammirato M. L., Delli Paoli A., Fruncillo D., Haerpfer C., and Maddaloni D. (2025). *Trust and voter turnout in Europe: Results from the Horizon TRUEDEM research project*. FrancoAngeli.

Addeo F., Fruncillo D., and Maddaloni D. (2025). Democratic innovations as a tool to restore trust and citizens' participation: A comparison between stakeholder groups in Italy. *Politics in Central Europe*, 21(3), 473-494. https://doi.org/10.2478/pce-2025-0019

Albanese G., Cioffi M., and Tommasino P. (2017). *Legislators' Behaviour and Electoral Rules: Evidence from an Italian Reform*. Bank of Italy Temi di Discussione (Working Papers), no. 1135.

Aldrin P. (2009). L'Union européenne face à l'opinion Construction et usages politiques de l'opinion comme problème communautaire. *Savoir/Agir*, 7(1), 13-23. https://doi.org/10.3917/sava.007.0013

Alekseyenkova S. (2024). The decline of populism? Crisis of trust and parties of political alternative in modern Italy. – Polis. *Political Studies*, 2024. No. 4. https://doi.org/10.17976/jpps/2024.04.09

Allegretti G. (2014). *Percorsi di partecipazione in Italia*. Carocci.

Allegretti G., Bobbio L., Pomatto G., and Stortone S. (2021). *La deliberazione pubblica in Italia*. Il Mulino.

Almond G. A., and Verba S. (1963) *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. Princeton University Press.

Angelucci, D., Bertsou, E., and Pastorella, G. (2025). Technocratic cabinets and electoral turnout: Evidence from Western Europe. *European Journal of Political Research*, 64(1), 45-67. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12632

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Angelucci D., and Vittori D. (2023). Look where you're going: the cultural and economic explanations of class voting decline. *West European Politics*, 46(1), 122-147. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2021.1987108

Arnone M., Drago C., Costantiello A., and Leogrande A. (2025). Political Trust in Italy: How Environmental, Social, and Governance Factors Shape Confidence in Parties. *Research Square*. https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-5930182/v1

Bagnasco A. (1977). *Tre Italie. La problematica territoriale nello sviluppo italiano*. Il Mulino.

Bagnasco A., Piselli F., Pizzorno A., and Trigilia C. (2001). *Il capitale sociale. Istruzioni per l'uso*. Il Mulino.

Banfield E. (1958). *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*. Free Press.

Bauhr M., and Charron N. (2018). Insider or outsider? Grand corruption and electoral accountability. *Comparative Political Studies*, 51(4), 415-446. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414017710258

Beck U. (1992). *Risk Society*. Sage.

Beetham D. (1991). *The Legitimation of Power*. Macmillan.

Bellucci, P. (2024). Presente e futuro della classe politica italiana. In P. Isernia, S. Martini, and L. Verzichelli (a cura di), *La classe politica italiana. Struttura, atteggiamenti, sfide* (pp. 154-163). Il Mulino.

Bertsou E. (2019). Rethinking political distrust. *European Political Science Review*, 11(2), 213-230. doi:10.1017/S1755773919000080

Bertsou E., and Caramani D. (2020). People's expectations of democracy: Technocratic attitudes across Europe. *Government and Opposition*, 55(4), 575-601. https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2018.45

Bertsou E., and Pastorella G. (2017). The political roots of technocratic attitudes in Europe. *European Union Politics*, 18(4), 620-638. https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116517703790

Best H., and Cotta M. (2000). *Parliamentary Representatives in Europe 1848-2000: Legislative Recruitment and Careers in Eleven European Countries*. Oxford University Press.

Bicchieri C., Mudambi R., and Navarra P. (2005). A matter of trust: The search for accountability in Italian politics, 1990-2000. *Mind & Society*, 4, 129-148. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11299-005-0002-y

Bickerton C. J., and Accetti C. I. (2017). Technocratic governance and depoliticisation: From passive citizens to active 'users'. In W. Merkel, and J. Zürn (Eds.), *Political representation: Institutions, inequality and empowerment* (pp. 187-208). ECPR Press.

Biffignandi S., and Betlehem J. (eds.) (2021). *Handbook of Web Surveys*. Wiley and Sons.

Bloor M., Frankland J., Thomas M., and Robson K. (2001). *Focus Groups in Social Research*. Sage.

Bobbio L. (2007). *Amministrare con i cittadini*. Laterza.

Bobbio N., Matteucci N., and Pasquino G. (2006). Tecnocrazia. In N. Bobbio, *Dizionario di politica. Volume 3* (pp. 591-598). Gruppo editoriale L'Espresso.

Bobbio N., Matteucci N., and Pasquino G. (2006). *Dizionario di politica* (3 volumi). Gruppo editoriale L'Espresso.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Bordandini P. (2015). La fiducia in Italia. In Aa.Vv., *L'Italia e le sue regioni. Volume IV: Società* (pp. 79-92). Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana.
Bordandini P., Maltagliati M., Bellanca N., and Cartocci R. (2024). Disgruntled Italians-social capital and civic culture in Italy. *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 29(2), 206-231. https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2023.2288430
Borriello A., and Brack N. (2019). 'I want my sovereignty back!' A comparative analysis of the populist discourses of Podemos, the 5 Star Movement, the FN and UKIP during the economic and migration crises. *Journal of European Integration*, 41(7), 833-853. https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2019.1665658
Bouckaert G., and Van de Walle S. (2003). Comparing measures of citizen trust and user satisfaction as indicators of 'good governance'. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 69(3), 329-343.
Bourdieu P. (2003). *Per una teoría della pratica*, Cortina, 2003 (ed. or. 1972).
Bulfone F., and Afonso A. (2019). Business Against Markets: Employer Resistance to Collective Bargaining Liberalization During the Eurozone Crisis. *Comparative Political Studies*, 53(5), 809-846. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414019879963.
Bull M. J., and Rhodes M. (Eds.) (1997). *Crisis and Transition in Italian Politics*. Routledge.
Calise M. (1998). *La costituzione silenziosa. Geografia dei nuovi poteri*. Laterza.
Canalda Criado S. (2022). Social partner participation in the management of the COVID-19 crisis: Tripartite social dialogue in Italy, Portugal and Spain. *International Labour Review*, 16(1), 149-167. https://doi.org/10.1111/ilr.12362
Cartocci R. (2007). *Mappe del tesoro. Atlante del capitale sociale in Italia*. Il Mulino.
Cartocci R., and Vanelli V. (2015). Una mappa del capitale sociale e della cultura civica in Italia. In Aa.Vv., *L'Italia e le sue regioni. Volume IV:* S*ocietà* (pp. 17-36). Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana.
Charron N., Lapuente V., and Rothstein B. (2013). *Quality of Government and Corruption from a European Perspective: A Comparative Study of Good Government in EU Regions*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
Chiaramonte A. (2023). Italy at the polls. Four lessons to learn from the 2022 general election. *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 15(1), 75-87. https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2022.2163453
Chiaramonte A., and De Sio L. (2019). *Il voto del cambiamento. Le elezioni politiche del 2018*. Il Mulino.
Chiaramonte A., Emanuele V., Maggini N., and Paparo A. (2022). Radical-Right Surge in a Deinstitutionalised Party System: The 2022 Italian General Election. *South European Society and Politics*, 27(3), 329-357. https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2022.2160088
Cicognani E., Tzankova I., Guarino A., and Mazzoni D. (2017). National report–Italy. In P. Noack, and P. Macek (Eds.), *Constructing active citizenship with European youth. Policies, practices, challenges and solutions. D7.2 findings of wave 1. A cross-national report* (pp. 8-64). University of Bologna.
Citrin J., and Stoker L. (2018). Political trust in a cynical age. *Annual review of political science*, 21(1), 49-70. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050316-092550

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Clarke N., Jennings W., Moss J., and Stoker J. (2018). *The Good Politician: Folk Theories, Political Interaction, and the Rise of Anti-Politics*. Cambridge University Press.

Conti N., Marangoni F., and Verzichelli L. (2020). Euroscepticism in Italy from the Onset of the Crisis: Tired of Europe? *South European Society and Politics*, 29(4), 431-456. https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2020.1757885

Cook K. S., and Hardin R. (1998). *Trust and Governance*. Russell Sage Foundation.

Cotta M., and Verzichelli L. (2007). *Political and bureaucratic elites in Western Europe*. Routledge.

Crouch C. (2004). *Post-Democracy*. Polity Press.

Dahl R. A. (1971). *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. Yale University Press.

Dalton R. J. (2004). *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices: The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. Oxford University Press.

Dalton R. J., and Weldon S. (2005). Public Images of Political Parties: A Necessary Evil? *West European Politics*, 28, 931-951.

Dalton R. J., and Welzel C. (2014). *The Civic Culture Transformed: From Allegiant to Assertive Citizens*. Cambridge University Press.

De Blasio E., and Sorice M. (2016). *La partecipazione politica in Italia*. Il Mulino.

De Blasio E., and Sorice M. (2018). *Partecipazione democratica e processi deliberativi*. Carocci.

De Blasio E., and Sorice M. (2019). The crisis of democracies and participatory innovations. *Partecipazione e Conflitto*, 12(1), 1-12.

Delhey J., and Newton K. (2005). Predicting Cross-National Levels of Social Trust. *European Sociological Review*, 21(4), 311-327. https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jci022

Delmotte F. (2008). La légitimité de l'Union européenne, une affaire de bons sentiments? Réflexions sur l'appartenance à la communauté politique. *Revue internationale de politique comparée*, 15(4), 541-554. https://doi.org/10.3917/ripc.154.0541.

Diamanti I. (2014). *La democrazia ibrida*. Laterza.

Della Porta D. (2011). *Democracies in Movement: Participation, Deliberation and Social Movements*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Della Porta D., and Vannucci A. (1999). *Corrupt Exchanges: Actors, Resources, and Mechanisms of Political Corruption*. Aldine de Gruyter.

Della Porta D., and Vannucci A. (2012). *The Hidden Order of Corruption: An Institutional Approach*. Ashgate.

Della Porta D., and Vannucci A. (2021). *La corruzione come sistema. Meccanismi, dinamiche, attori*. Il Mulino.

Devine D., and Valgarðsson V. O. (2024). Stability and change in political trust: Evidence and implications from six panel studies. *European Journal of Political Research*, 63(2), 478-497. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12606

Dryzek J. S. (2000). *Deliberative democracy and beyond: Liberals, critics, contestations*. Oxford University Press.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Dunford M. (2008). After the three Italies the (internally differentiated) North-South divide: analysing regional and industrial trajectories. *Annales de géographie*, 664(6), 85-114. https://doi.org/10.3917/ag.664.0085.
Durkheim E. (2016). *La divisione del lavoro sociale*. Il Saggiatore (or. ed. 1893).
Easton, D. (1965). *A Framework for Political Analysis*. Prentice-Hall.
Easton D. (1975). A Re-assessment of the Concept of Political Support. *British Journal of Political Science*, 5(4): 435-457. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123400008309
Elstub S., and Escobar O. (eds.) (2019). *Handbook of Democratic Innovation and Governance*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
Emanuele V. (2015). Vote (de-)nationalisation and party system change in Italy (1948-2013). *Contemporary Italian Politics*. https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2015.1076617
Emanuele V., and Chiaramonte A. (2020). Going out of the ordinary. The de-institutionalization of the Italian party system in comparative perspective. *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 12(1), 4-22. https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2020.1711608
Fabbrini S. (2014). The EU's 'democracy paradox': Why the EU needs a supranational democracy. *European Constitutional Law Review*, 10(1), 1-21. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1574019614000011
Fabbrini S. (2021). *Europe's constitutional crisis: Resolving the post-Maastricht political asymmetry*. Cambridge University Press.
Ferrera M., and Gualmini E. (1999). *Salvati dall'Europa?* Il Mulino.
Ferrin M., and Kriesi H. P. (eds.), *How Europeans View and Evaluate Democracy*. Oxford University Press.
Fishkin J. S. (2018). *Democracy when the people are thinking: Revitalizing our politics through public deliberation*. Oxford University Press.
Floridia A. (2012). *La democrazia deliberativa*. Il Mulino.
Floridia A. (2017). *From Participation to Deliberation: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Democratic Reform*. ECPR Press.
Floridia A. (2020). *La crisi della democrazia*. Il Mulino.
Fruncillo D. (2004). *Urna del silenzio. L'astensionismo elettorale in Italia*. Ediesse.
Fruncillo D. (2023). Emozioni, leadership e declino della partecipazione al voto. *ItalianiEuropei*, 6, 33-38.
Fung A. (2015). Putting the public back into governance: The challenges of citizen participation and its future. *Public Administration Review*, 75(4), 513-522. https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.12375
Galli G. (1967). *Il bipartitismo imperfetto. Comunisti e democristiani in Italia*. Il Mulino.
Gallino L. (2000). *Globalizzazione e disuguaglianze*. Laterza.
Gallino L. (2004). Tecnocrazia. In L. Gallino, *Dizionario di sociologia* (pp. 696-699). UTET.
Gallino L. (2004). *Dizionario di sociologia*. UTET.
Garzia D. (2023). The Italian parliamentary election of 2022: the populist radical right takes charge. *West European Politics*, 46(5), 1038-1048. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2022.2148603

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Giannone D., and Cozzolino A. (2023). Technocratic populism: A new form of political legitimation? *Politics and Governance*, 11(1), 45-55. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v11i1.6210

Gibson J. L., and Caldeira G. A. (1995). The Legitimacy of Transnational Legal Institutions: Compliance, Support, and the European Court of Justice. *American Journal of Political Science*, 39(2), 459-489. https://doi.org/10.2307/2111623

Giddens A. (1990). *The Consequences of Modernity*. Polity Press.

Ginsborg P. (2006). *Storia d'Italia dal dopoguerra ad oggi*. Einaudi.

Glaser B. G., and Strauss A. L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Aldine.

Gonthier F., Aymé P., and Belot C. (2024). *Political Trust and Democratic Innovations: State-of-the-Art Report*. Working paper no. 9.1. TRUEDEM: Trust in European Democracies Project (www.truedem.eu).

Gulino G. (2021). Electoral Systems, Selection, and Re-election: Evidence from Italian Municipalities. *The Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization*, 37(3), 534-570. https://doi.org/10.1093/jleo/ewaa024

Habermas J. (1996). *Between facts and norms: Contributions to a discourse theory of law and democracy*. MIT Press.

Hall P. A., and Taylor R. C. R. (1996). Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms. *Political Studies*, 44(5), 936-957.

Hardin R. (2002). *Trust and Trustworthiness*. Russell Sage Foundation.

Hetherington, M. J. (1998). The political relevance of political trust. *American Political Science Review*, 92(4), 791-808. https://doi.org/10.2307/2586304

Hosteins L. (2025). Two countries, one shared mechanism? The making of local representatives' mistrust towards citizen's participation in democracy in a comparative perspective. AIS Sociologia Politica, *Conflitti e potere nella società contemporanea. Disuguaglianze sociali, fratture politiche e sfide alla democrazia*. Convegno nazionale, Università degli studi di Perugia, 25-27 settembre.

Ingelgom V. (2020). Focus groups: from qualitative data generation to analysis. In L. Curini, and R. Franzese, *Focus groups: from qualitative data generation to analysis*, vol. 2 (pp. 1190-1210). Sage Publications Ltd. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526486387.n65

Isernia P., and Martini S. (2024). Pubblico vs. politici. L'immagine dell'opinione pubblica tra i politici. In P. Isernia, S. Martini, and L. Verzichelli (a cura di), *La classe politica italiana. Struttura, atteggiamenti, sfide* (pp. 80-98). Il Mulino.

Isernia P., Martini S., and Verzichelli L. (a cura di) (2024). *La classe politica italiana. Struttura, atteggiamenti, sfide*. Il Mulino.

Kizilova K., Belot C., Haerpfer C., Gonthier F., and Palt C. (2024). *Qualitative Studies: Methodological Guidelines and Data*. Working paper no. 8.2. TRUEDEM: Trust in European Democracies Project (www.truedem.eu).

Klingemann, H. D. (1999). Mapping Political Support in the 1990s: A Global Analysis. In P. Norris (ed.), *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government* (pp. 31-56). Oxford University Press.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Kotze H., and Garcia-Rivero C. (2017). Institutions, crises, and political confidence in seven contemporary democracies. An elite-mass analysis. *Journal of Public Affairs*, 17(1-2), 17:e1642. https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.1642
Kristiansen T. M., and Grønkjær I. M. (2018). Focus Groups as Social Arenas for the Negotiation of Normativity. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 17, eLocator1609406917747393.
Laurano P. (2022). Trust, Vaccines and Democracy: The Situation in European Countries and the Italian Case. *The Review of Contemporary Scientific and Academic Studies*, 2(9), 10-10. https://doi.org/10.55454/rcsas.2.9.2022.010
Lavezzolo S., Sarrica M., and Brondi S. (2021). Trust in experts during the pandemic: The role of political orientation and institutional communication in Italy. *Health Communication*, 37(14), 1809-1817. https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2021.1930631
Levi M., and Stoker L. (2000). Political Trust and Trustworthiness. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 3, 475-507. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.3.1.475
Lipset S. M. (1959). Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy. *American Political Science Review*, 53(1): 69-105. https://doi.org/10.2307/1951731
Luhmann N. (1979). *Trust and Power*. Wiley.
Mahoney J., and Thelen K. (2010). *Explaining Institutional Change*. Cambridge University Press
Mair P. (2013). *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing-out of Western Democracy*. Verso.
Marangoni F., and Padoan E. (2025). Unveiling Political (Dis)trust Building across Different Life Stages: A Focus Group Analysis on Trust and Distrust to COVID-Related Restrictions in Italy. *Political Studies Review*, 0(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/14789299241311762
Marini S., and Piccolino G. (2023). Right-wing victory in the 2022 Italian parliamentary election: territorial patterns and systemic implications. *Quaderni dell'Osservatorio Elettorale / Italian Journal of Electoral Studies*, 86(1), 29-50. https://doi.org/10.36253/qoe-14391
Marradi A. (1992). Classificazioni, tipologie, tassonomie. In Aa.Vv., *Enciclopedia delle scienze sociali*, vol. II (pp. 22-30). Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana.
Marradi A., and Rodolfi F. (1999). Rivendicando il ruolo della tipologia. *Quaderni di Sociologia*, 19, 102-136. https://doi.org/10.4000/qds.1457
Marsh D., and Akram S. (2015). Political participation and citizen engagement: beyond the mainstream. *Policy Studies*, 36(6), 523-531. https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2015.1109616
Martinelli A., and Chiesi A. M. (2002). *La società italiana*. Laterza.
Martini S., and Quaranta M. (2015). Finding Out the Hard Way: Uncovering the Structural Foundations of Political Dissatisfaction in Italy, 1973-2013. *West European Politics*, 38(1), 28-52. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2014.943524
Marx K. (2024). *Per la critica dell'economia politica. Introduzione e prefazione*. Clinamen (or. ed. 1859).

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Matland R. E. (1997). Ambiguity and bias in the implementation of Title IX. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 7(1), 1-23. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.jpart.a024170
Matthijs M. (2017). The EU's legitimacy crisis after the euro crisis: A critical review of the literature. *Journal of European Integration*, 39(3), 245-261. https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2017.1295230
Mayer R. C., Davis J. H., and Schoorman F. D. (1995). An Integrative Model of Organizational Trust. *Academy of Management Review*, 20(3), 709-734. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1995.9508080335
Merler A. (2019). Technocratic legitimacy in Europe. *European Journal of Political Research*, 58(2), 519-542. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12297
Mete V., Tuorto D. (2025). *Il partito che non c'è. L'astensionismo elettorale in Italia e in Europa*. Il Mulino.
Mongrain P., Junius N., and Brack N. (2024). As you wish? Public preferences for models of representation and MPs' role orientations. *European Journal of Political Research*, 64(3), 1208-1232. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12734
Moro G. (2009). *Cittadini in formazione: l'educazione civica nella società che cambia*. Carocci.
Moro G. (2013). *Cittadinanza attiva e qualità della democrazia*. Il Mulino.
Mounk Y. (2018). *The people vs. democracy: Why our freedom is in danger and how to save it*. Harvard University Press.
Muñoz J. (2017). 5. Political trust and multilevel government. In S. Zmerli, and T. W. G. van de Meer (Eds.), *Handbook on political trust* (pp. 69-88). Edward Elgar Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781782545118.00015
Murtin F., et al. (2018). *Trust and its Determinants: Evidence from OECD Countries*. OECD Statistics Working Papers. https://doi.org/10.1787/869ef2ec-en
Newton K., and Zmerli S. (2011). Three Forms of Trust and Their Association. *European Political Science Review*, 3(2), 169-200. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773910000330
Norris P. (Ed.) (1999). *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government*. Oxford University Press.
Norris P. (2011). *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited*. Cambridge University Press.
Norris P. (2018). Trust, but Verify: Information, Misinformation and Media Effects on Political Trust. In S. Zmerli, and T. van der Meer (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Political Trust* (pp. 81-98). Routledge.
Norris P. (2022). *In Praise of Skepticism: Trust but Verify*. Oxford University Press.
Norris P., and Inglehart R. (2019). *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit and Authoritarian Populism*. Cambridge University Press.
OECD (2024). *Society at a Glance 2024: OECD Social Indicators*. OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/918d8db3-en.
Ostrom E. (1998). A Behavioral Approach to the Rational Choice Theory of Collective Action. *American Political Science Review*, 92(1), 1-22.
Ostrom E., and Walker J. (2003). *Trust and Reciprocity: Interdisciplinary Lessons from Experimental Research*. Russell Sage Foundation.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Panzano G., and Marini S. (2025). Italy's democratic quality and the role of political parties: comparative empirical patterns. *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*. Published online 2025:1-18. https://doi.org/10.1017/ipo.2025.7

Parisi A. (1995). Appartenenza, opinione, scambio. In A. Parisi, and H. Schadee (a cura di), *Sulla soglia del cambiamento* (pp. 359-395). Il Mulino.

Parisi A., and Pasquino G. (1985). Relazione partiti-elettori e tipi di voto. In G. Pasquino (a cura di), *Il sistema politico italiano* (pp. 74-93). Laterza.

Pasquino G., and Valbruzzi M. (2010). Still an outlier: Italy in a Southern European comparative perspective. *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 15(2), 183-199. https://doi.org/10.1080/13545711003606578

Pasquino G., and Valbruzzi M. (2015). *A Changing Republic: Politics and Democracy in Italy*. Epoké

Pateman C. (1970). *Participation and democratic theory*. Cambridge University Press.

Piccolino G., Puleo L., and Soare S. (2020). Europe Up for Grabs: an Italian Perspective. In R. Carp, and C. Matjuta (Eds.), *2019 European Elections: The EU Party Democracy and the Challenge of National Populism* (pp. 113-137). Brill.

Przeworski A., Alvarez M. E., Cheibub J. A., and Limongi F. (1996). What Makes Democracies Endure? *Journal of Democracy*, 7(1), 39-55. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1996.0016

Putnam R. D. (1993). *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton University Press.

Putnam R. D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Simon and Schuster.

Rawls J. (1993). *Political Liberalism*. Columbia University Press.

Rhodes R. A. W. (2011). *Everyday life in a ministry: Public service at the top*. Oxford University Press.

Rosanvallon P. (2008). *Counter-democracy: Politics in an age of distrust*. Cambridge University Press.

Rosenberg M. (1954). Some Determinants of Political Apathy. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 18(4), 349-366.

Rothstein B., and Stolle D. (2008). The State and Social Capital: An Institutional Theory of Generalized Trust. *Comparative P*olitics, 40(4), 441-459.

Rothstein B., and Teorell J. (2008). What is quality of government? A theory of impartial government institutions. *Governance*, 21(2), 165-190. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0491.2008.00391.x

Rudolph T., and Evans J. (2005). Political Trust, Ideology, and Public Support for Government Spending. *American Journal of Political Science*, 49(3), 660-671. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2005.00148.x

Sampugnaro R., and Montemagno F. (2024). Before and after. Italian MPs and political communication. *Parliaments, Estates and Representation*, 45(1), 129-151. https://doi.org/10.1080/02606755.2024.2387956

Sani G., and Segatti P. (2001). *La cultura politica degli italiani*. Il Mulino.

Sartori G. (1982). *Teoria dei partiti e caso italiano*. SugarCo.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Sartori G. (1987). *The theory of democracy revisited*. Chatham House Publishers.
Sberna S., and Vannucci A. (2013). *Il sistema della corruzione in Italia*. Il Mulino.
Scharpf F. W. (1999). *Governing in Europe: Effective and democratic?* Oxford University Press.
Schobess R., and de Vet B. (2022). The good, the loyal or the active? MPs' parliamentary performance and the achievement of static and progressive career ambitions in parliament. *European Political Science Review*, 14(4), 600-617. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773922000340
Scoppola P. (2021). *La repubblica dei partiti. Evoluzione e crisi di un sistema politico (1945-1996)*. Il Mulino.
Sevenans J., Soontjens K., and Walgrave S. (2021). Inequality in the public priority perceptions of elected representatives. *West European Politics*, 45(5), 1057-1080. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2021.1928830
Shea D. M. (2015). Young Voters, Declining Trust and the Limits of "Service Politics". *The Forum*, 13(3), 459-479. https://doi.org/10.1515/for-2015-0036
Silverman D. (2010). *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook*. 4th edition. Sage.
Silverman D. (2015). *Interpreting Qualitative Data*. 5th edition. Sage.
Simmel G. (1990). *The Philosophy of Money*. Routledge (or. ed. 1908).
Sintos A., Chletsos M., and Kontos K. (2024). The political process in nations: Civil society participation and income inequality. *Kyklos*, 77(3), 471-495. https://doi.org/10.1111/kykl.12375
Stanzani S. (2020). Trust and Civic Engagement in the Italian COVID-19 Lockdown. *Italian Sociological Review*, 10(3S), 917. https://doi.org/10.13136/isr.v10i3S.405
Strauss A. L. (1987). *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*. Cambridge University Press.
Streeck W., and Thelen K. (Eds.) (2005). *Beyond Continuity*. Oxford University Press.
Sudulich L., Trumm S., and Bridgewater J. (2020). Parliamentary Representation: A Cross-national Study of Candidates' Views. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 73(3), 522-542. https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsz009
Teixeira A., and Freire T. (2013). The Leisure Attitude Scale: psychometrics properties of a short version for adolescents and young adults. *Leisure/Loisir*, 37(1), 57-67. https://doi.org/10.1080/14927713.2013.776748
Torcal M. (2017). Political trust in western and southern Europe. In S. Zmerli, and T. W. Van der Meer (Eds.), *Handbook on political trust*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
Torcal M., and Montero J. R. (2006). *Political Disaffection in Contemporary Democracies: Social Capital, Institutions and Politics*. Routledge.
Trigilia C. (1986). *Grandi partiti e piccole imprese. Comunisti e democristiani nelle regioni a economia diffusa*. Il Mulino.
Trigilia C. (2005). *Sviluppo senza autonomia*. Il Mulino.
Tzankova I., Prati G., and Cicognani E. (2021). Profiles of Citizenship Orientations Among Youth. *YOUNG*, 30(1), 57-79. https://doi.org/10.1177/11033088211008691

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Valgarðsson V. O., Clarke N., Jennings W., and Stoker G. (2020). The Good Politician and Political Trust: An Authenticity Gap in British Politics? *Political Studies*, 69(4), 858-880. https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321720928257
Van der Meer T. W. G. (2017). Political Trust and the "Crisis of Democracy". *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.77
Van der Meer T. W. G., and Zmerli S. (2017). The deeply rooted concern with political trust. In S. Zmerli, and T. W. G. van der Meer (Eds.), *Handbook on Political Trust* (pp. 1-15). Edward Elgar.
Vassallo S. (a cura di) (2016). *Sistemi politici comparati. Seconda edizione*. Il Mulino.
Vecchi V. (2019). *Il capitale sociale nelle comunità locali*. Egea.
Vittori D., Font J., and Grau-Mira I. (2023). Do citizens trust technocrats? Findings from a survey experiment in nine European countries. *European Political Science Review*, 15(2), 201-219. https://doi.org/10.1017/S175577392200023X
Vittori D., Grau-Mira I., and Font J. (2024). The deliberative potential of citizens' assemblies: Evidence from Europe. *Democratization*, 31(3), 512-530. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2023.2236321
Walgrave S., Soroka S., Loewen P., Sheafer T., and Soontjens K. (2022). Revisiting Elite Perceptions as Mediator of Elite Responsiveness to Public Opinion. *Political Studies*, 72(1), 364-379. https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217221105170
Warren M. E. (2017). A problem-based approach to democratic theory. *American Political Science Review*, 111(1), 39-53. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055416000605
Warren M. E. (2018). Trust and Democracy. In E. Uslaner (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Social and Political Trust*. Oxford University Press.

Copyright © 2026 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milan, Italy. ISBN 9788835191674

Comunicaci il tuo giudizio su:
www.francoangeli.it/opinione

VUOI RICEVERE GLI AGGIORNAMENTI
SULLE NOSTRE NOVITÀ
NELLE AREE CHE TI INTERESSANO?

ISCRIVITI ALLE NOSTRE NEWSLETTER

SEGUICI SU:

FrancoAngeli
La passione per le conoscenze

Vi aspettiamo su:

www.francoangeli.it

per scaricare (gratuitamente) i cataloghi delle nostre pubblicazioni

DIVISI PER ARGOMENTI E CENTINAIA DI VOCI: PER FACILITARE LE VOSTRE RICERCHE.

Management, finanza, marketing, operations, HR
Psicologia e psicoterapia: teorie e tecniche
Didattica, scienze della formazione
Economia, economia aziendale
Sociologia
Antropologia
Comunicazione e media
Medicina, sanità

Architettura, design, arte, territorio
Informatica, ingegneria
Scienze
Filosofia, letteratura, linguistica, storia
Politica, diritto
Psicologia, benessere, autoaiuto
Efficacia personale
Politiche e servizi sociali

FrancoAngeli

La passione per le conoscenze

This book presents the Italian findings of the TRUEDEM (Trust in European Democracies) research project, an EU Horizon research project led by Christian Haerpfer (University of Vienna) and Pippa Norris (Harvard University). It offers a multi-perspective analysis of political trust in contemporary Italy, a highly topical subject given the democratic challenges facing the country.

Italy is at a critical juncture. Voter abstention has reached historic levels, political instability has become endemic, and citizens are increasingly expressing disillusionment with democratic institutions. However, academic understanding of the dynamics underlying trust remains fragmented. This book fills that gap by providing the first comprehensive and empirically grounded analysis of political trust in Italy from the perspective of multiple stakeholders.

The research builds on Norris' influential work on sceptical trust, which posits that citizens in modern democracies increasingly base their political judgements on rational assessments of the competence, integrity and accountability of institutions, rather than on ideological loyalty or clientelistic exchange. This framework proves particularly illuminating for understanding the Italian case, where traditional party alliances have collapsed.

The volume combines qualitative and quantitative approaches across four distinct target groups: political elites, civil society leaders, citizens, and the general population. Key topics include: how politicians and public officials perceive citizens' trust and their own reliability; the effectiveness of civil society organisations as intermediaries and guardians of democracy; the growing detachment of citizens from politics and their expectations for democratic innovation; the complex relationship between technocracy and political trust; and a quantitative analysis of perceived versus normative trustworthiness.

This volume is aimed at scholars and students of political science, sociology and European studies, as well as policymakers, journalists, and informed citizens interested in understanding the roots of democratic malaise in Italy and potential paths towards renewed civic engagement.

Domenico Maddaloni is full professor of Sociology at the University of Salerno, Department of Political and Communication Sciences. He is co-author of *Trust and voter turnout in Europe. Results from the Horizon TRUEDEM research project* (FrancoAngeli, 2025).

FrancoAngeli
La passione per le conoscenze