Decline, Transformation and Trust in Parliaments: the Portuguese Case in a Longitudinal and Comparative Perspective

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Abstract. In this article we will analyse trends in levels of trust in national parliaments across Europe and individual determinants for trust in the Spanish, Italian and Portuguese parliaments. To do so, we will integrate two theoretical and research perspectives that are not normally associated with studying parliamentary institutions. The first focuses on studying citizens' attitudes and political behaviour to understand causes and consequences of the growing erosion of public support for democratic institutions. The second aims at studying the role of parliaments and is mainly concerned with the decline and transformation of legislatures. Given the more detailed and available empirical information for the Portuguese case, we will attempt to discover if the trust Portuguese citizens place in their parliament is associated with their views on its roles and functions. However, comparisons with the Spanish and Italian cases will also be done in this respect.

The triumph of democracy and the erosion of public support for political institutions

As the wave of democratisation spread to new countries during the last two decades of the twentieth century, particularly in Eastern Europe, there was a renewed and growing optimism about the democratic process in general.

However, shortly after some authors expressed concerns about the survival and consolidation chances of Eastern Europe's new democratic regimes. Regardless of differences between Eastern Europe's new democracies and the established ones in the industrialised West, by the end of the 1990s there was also an apparently paradoxical growing concern among political scientists about issues of popular trust in the political institutions. An intense debate on the 'quality of democracy' followed within advanced democracies, arguing that at the beginning of the millennium they faced serious challenges and opportunities (Dalton, 2004; Diamond and Morlino 2004a; 2004b; Diamond and Morlino 2005). Many authors claimed that advanced industrial democracies had to face a 'malaise of the spirit' caused by structural changes and changes in values associated with the transition from industrial to post-industrial societies.

According to more recent studies, what caused this 'malaise' was not exogenous to democracies, as had been the case at the beginning of the twentieth century, but endogenous. Indeed, it was associated with citizens' increasing suspicion and critique of their political institutions' way of operating, along with cynicism vis-à-vis the performance of their elected representatives (Dalton, 1996).

Does this justify Russell Dalton's comment that 'we seemingly live in the best of times ... and the worst of times for the democratic process' (Dalton, 2006: 245)?

Parliaments: between institutional centrality and functional decline?

Given the decline in trust that citizens have for parliament, the paradox Dalton identifies in

relation to democracy can be extended to include the parliamentary institution (Pharr, Dalton and Putnam, 2000). This happens precisely because if it is consensual that parliament is a central institution to modern democracy, bearing responsibility as the collective body and representative assembly that expresses the people's will and holds the executive to account, it is also consensual to say that this very centrality to democratic political life has frequently been questioned by many authors, essayists and political commentators, who note and lament the decline of its traditional authority and political status (Norton,1990).

Debate about the decline of parliaments still goes on today, as new arguments are added to the previous ones (Norton, 1990; 1998; 2002; Bandeira, 2005; Pasquino and Pellizzo, 2006). Obsessed with the role of political parties and the predominance of executives, a significant part of all literature focuses on the decline of parliament in modern democracies, insisting that it has progressively (and worryingly) lost many of its traditional roles (Norton 1990).

In the last decade of the twentieth century there was a renewed momentum in legislative research, as a result of the spread of democratic institutions. Consequently, two questions were frequently posed: what purpose do parliaments actually follow and to what extent do they contribute to strengthen democracy in contemporary political systems?

The answers to these questions have addressed the functions attributed by specialized literature to modern parliaments, frequently ignoring the debate between the analysis of the functions prescribed by the normative theory and the actual functions observed by empirical theory.

We should start by acknowledging that parliaments do not just make laws and that laws are not only made by parliaments. As Pasquino notes, the complete identification of parliaments with the legislative role is as misleading as the complete identification of governments with the executive functions, therefore there is the risk of overlooking other important roles exercised by parliament and speaking unreasonably about its supposed decline because we underestimate its real significance within modern democratic systems (Pasquino, 2002; Pasquino and Pellizo, 2006).

Concerning the legislative role, although the liberal tradition of the separation of powers remains unaltered in the constitutional texts, it must be recognised that today it is mainly governments that make laws in order to fulfil promises they make in party manifestos. This leaves parliament with the task of keeping some form of control over the legislative output, assuming a more important role in the final deliberation phase.

Hence, it would be more accurate to affirm that both modern parliaments and governments legislate. This is particularly so when the actual circumstances of the "party government" presuppose that the party in government imposes discipline upon its obedient MPs, while the opposition also manages to secure the continued and disciplined support of its deputies and thereby present itself as an organised alternative to the government (Bowler, Farrell and Katz, 1999; Blondel and Cotta, 2000).

Nonetheless, it is possible to measure the decline of parliaments through the production of laws, although this may not be the case when assessing its other basic roles, especially its ability to oversee government. Thus, it becomes important to ask how the role of parliamentary supervision should now be interpreted.

Firstly, in parliamentary systems the government should have the explicit trust of parliament, through establishing very close ties with the parliamentary majority (or "victorious minority"). The parliament's oversight role, which is understood to be the public examination of governmental activities, has become the main function of the opposition.

It might be both precipitate and inaccurate to claim that the fusion of the parliamentary majority and government removes the supervisory role from parliament. It should also be noted that this is not the only situation in which the majority can demonstrate its support for the government, and it is also the situation in which the opposition is able to exercise critical and active supervision.

Besides the preponderance of governments, excessive power held by extra-parliament party organizations over parliaments' organization has been pointed out as one of the causes of its supposed decline. In many European democracies, parties control both the electoral system and candidates' selection, therefore disciplining their parliamentarians,. However, we can't ignore the current tendency that points towards the primacy of the parties in parliament over their extra-parliamentary face (Katz and Mair, 1993; 2002).

We must then conclude that the thesis supporting parliaments' decline, which dominates specialized literature on this theme, has many insurmountable weaknesses. It has been based on an ideal model constructed on a foundation of doctrinal conceptions that date back to the parliamentary 'golden age', rather than on empirical observations. Given the scientific limitations of the thesis of the decline of parliaments here presented, it is now crucial that we understand what new roles these institutions will perform within European political systems.

The most recent studies tend to focus on other parliamentary functions that have until recently been neglected, but which are now believed to be central to the political system. One of them is the

"pedagogical role" that Bagehot spoke of in the nineteenth century (Bagehot 1995 [1867]). It is the role that contemporary parliaments assume through the work they carry out both in plenary sessions and in commissions to foster in the public a better understanding of the complex nature of politics, decision-making processes, and choices between alternative public policies.

Another one is the legitimation role as conceived by Robert Packenham (1970), Michael Mezey (1979), and Philip Norton (2002), and which has become parliaments' most important role in terms of consent mobilisation during the period between elections. This takes place by providing a permanent channel of communication between the government and the electorate, thus creating a means for the direct and indirect resolution of problems and appeals of society through legitimising decisions that have been made elsewhere.

From trust in the democratic institutions to trust in parliament

The legislative research change present in the analysis of the role of parliament is missing one essential aspect related to the citizens' support of parliament as an institution. This new understanding of the function considers modern parliaments essential institutions to the creation of a support base for the democratic regime and to ensure citizen consent for the resolutions of the executive.

Since the trust that is deposited in legislatures can reinforce the 'diffuse support' for the government, we're left with a question: *how can any parliament fulfil its essential role of legitimisation, if it cannot secure the support and trust of its citizens?*

This new understanding of the role played by parliaments places a once fundamental theme in the literature on political attitudes at the centre of the literature on legislative studies: public support for democratic political institutions.

On the new research legislative agenda is the need to integrate two previously distinct perspectives: the analysis of the role and functions of parliament and public support for parliament (Leston-Bandeira, 2002a; 2002b; 2003). This article is an attempt to combine these two perspectives.

The recent literature on institutional trust can be divided into three theoretical approaches, each one concerned mainly with either the importance of cultural attitudes and values, diffuse support as opposed to specific support, or institutional rules. Below we provide a brief overview of all three.

Institutional trust and political culture

Some authors relate the decline of trust in political institutions within advanced industrial democracies to profound changes in political culture. These are necessarily reflected on political socialisation patterns, and consequently contribute to changes in the values, attitudes and behaviours of citizens in relation to the political institutions and authorities.

From the "cultural approach", largely developed by Ronald Inglehart, this demonstrates how the processes of socio-economic and cultural modernisation which have affected all of Western Europe through its transformation from industrial to post-industrial societies have been responsible for some significant changes in the priorities and values of the citizens.

This "silent revolution" led, in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, to a decline in the materialist values and a growth in the so-called post-material values shared by large sections of a population that had been socialised during a period of remarkable economic prosperity, physical security and peace. Their main concerns were the quality of life, freedom of expression and individual achievement (Inglehart, 1977; 1990).

However, what most interests us is that, according to Inglehart, the transition between these two value systems has implications for many aspects of political life, namely how the better educated younger generation that is increasingly politically mobilised and aware tends to be more mistrustful and critical of traditional sources of religious or secular authority.

This generation also resorts increasingly to forms of political participation that are more independent and less based on external political mobilisation. The elite-led and controlled political mobilisation tends thus to give way to a form of mobilisation that is led by citizens seeking to control the political elite.

Institutional trust and social capital

Robert Putnam developed another explanatory thesis for the erosion of trust in democratic political institutions, still within the "cultural approach", in his books on social capital, namely Making Democracy Work (1993) and Bowling Alone (2000). Revisiting a concept that has been present in classical sociology from Weber to Durkheim and from Tocqueville to Bourdieu, Putnam's approach shares the view according to which the norms of reciprocity, interpersonal and institutional trust and civic networks that exist within any given society will take on a decisive role in ensuring that its democratic institutions function well.

Putnam argues that during the last decades there has been a decline in the level of social capital in advanced industrial societies that can be explained by the break-down of the traditional family system, uncontrolled urbanisation and the continued weakening of neighbourhood and community ties caused by the increasingly frenetic lifestyles that are imposed upon us by modern societies. He

points these factors as responsible for people's growing isolation and for the irreparable loss of social cohesion and solidarity. He also blames technological innovation, and in particular the harmful effects of mass communication and new information technologies such as television and the Internet, which have much contributed to the substitution of civic activities and public engagement for "privatised" and "individualist" forms of leisure and entertainment.

Hence, and according to Putnam, all of these factors, in contributing to the decline of social capital, seriously harm the performance of the democratic political system while they simultaneously encourage the decline in public support for its central institutions.

Institutional trust and specific support

Without forgetting the profound socio-economic and cultural transformations that have taken place since the end of the Second World War, and the decisive role they have played in changing attitudes and political behaviour within advanced industrial democracies, Dalton suggests that this change in the political culture cannot by itself explain the increasing public mistrust in the democratic institutions (Dalton 1996; 1999; Norris 1999).

Starting from the approach pioneered by David Easton (1965), then developed by many other authors, Dalton argues that the current tendency must also be assessed in the light of the "diffuse support" and the "specific support" that citizens concede to different political objects, particularly to the political community, political regime (norms, processes and institutions), and authorities or holders of political offices. It is precisely this type of approach that allows Dalton and others to argue empirically that the erosion of trust in institutions and authorities in the majority of advanced industrial democracies is simultaneous with the growing diffuse support for democracy.

The notion of "diffuse support" refers to the normative adherence created by political institutions as such, or in other terms, to the intrinsic value that is attributed to them by the citizens and to their unwillingness to accept changes that may compromise their performance, independently of any benefits or specific advantages that they may at any given moment obtain as a consequence of their decisions.

The concept of "specific support" reflects the degree of satisfaction with the actual performance and outputs of political institutions and, consequently, depends on the assessment that citizens make of the responses to their demands and how costs and benefits are distributed among the population at any given moment.

Many authors believe there are powerful reasons to accept that mistrust in political institutions is largely the result of the decrease in "specific support" dictated by economic factors that are associated with the citizens' assessment of the sitting government and its performance, as well as their appraisal of the economy and of economic trends, particularly during periods of crisis or recession (Magalhães, 2002; 2003). At this point we ought to state that in our essay we widen the approaches taken by the authors mentioned above and in particular address the question of trust in parliaments in Spain, Italy and Portugal.

Dependent variable: trust in national parliaments

In order to measure the evolutionary trend of trust levels in the national parliaments of the European countries in our set, we use two types of empirical data. The dates studied range between 1981 and 2008. The two types of data are divided between those produced under the aegis of the World Values Survey, and those obtained in the periodical Eurobarometer surveys.

Table 1 shows how the citizens' trust in national parliaments in the different countries evolved. To assist with the analysis the countries are grouped into four regions: Northern, Eastern, Southern and Western Europe. The first conclusion that can be drawn from the data in this table is that levels of trust in national parliaments are relatively low, although in average terms they are higher in Northern and Central Europe, and much lower in Eastern Europe.

On the other hand, and still talking in average terms, analysis of the data allows us to identify a trend that cuts across all of the regions. Between 1981 and 1999, and 2000 and 2008 there was a general decline in the trust citizens had in their national parliaments, with the extent of this decline varying in each country. This decline was found in all regions and was greater during the earlier period than during the later period being analysed here.

The analysis of Table 1 also shows that the level of trust the Portuguese had in their parliament was very similar to that found in Spain during these two periods, and slightly higher than that found in Italy or the United Kingdom, although all of these countries have experienced a sharp decline in the level of trust during the past three decades.

Given this comparative trend, these data enable us to refute the idea, commonly accepted by some commentators and political observers, that one of the distinctive traits of Portuguese political culture—currently and historically—is the tendency to devalue and underestimate the parliamentary institution.

Moreover, the comparative and longitudinal data prove the lie of the signs of this supposed 'anti-

Table 1. Trust in selected European parliaments (%)

	1981-93	1994-99	2000-04	2005-08
Denmark	42	–	65	75
Estonia	68	42	–	46
Finland	54	32	–	66
Ireland	50	–	55	40
Latvia	72	24	41	29
Lithuania	65	23	–	15
United Kingdom	44	–	33	34
Sweden	47	44	54	54
Northern Europe (mean)	**55**	**33**	**50**	**45**
Germany	46	32	40	40
Austria	40	–	46	51
Belgium	42	–	44	45
France	48	–	40	34
Luxembourg	–	–	63	54
Netherlands	53	44	53	50
Central Europe (mean)	**46**	**38**	**48**	**45**
Spain	39	35	49	46
Greece	–	–	55	44
Italy	32	–	35	30
Portugal	36	–	44	38
Southern Europe (mean)	**35**		**46**	**40**
Bulgaria	48	42	–	21
Czech Republic	45	20	–	18
Slovakia	–	28	–	30
Slovenia	–	24	–	33
Hungary	40	37	–	27
Poland	78	31	–	13
Romania	22	18	–	21
Eastern Europe (mean)	**47**	**28**	**–**	**23**

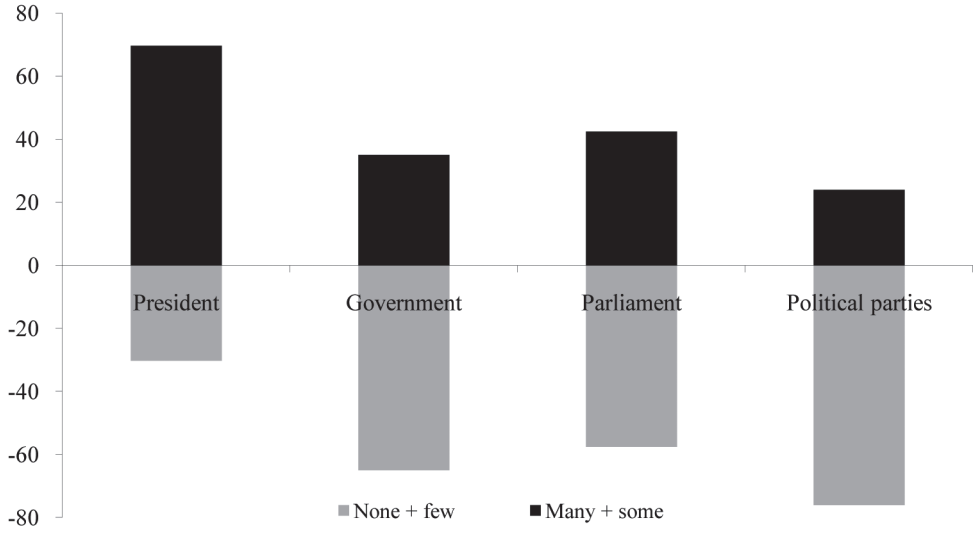
Sources: Data elaborated by authors from *World Values Survey*, 1981-1984; 1989-1993; 1994-1999; 1999-2004; 2005-2008, *Eurobarometer Survey Series*: 2000 EB54, 2001 EB56, 2002 EB57, 2003 EB59, 2004 EB61, 2005 EB63, 2006 EB65, 2007 EB66, 2008 EB69.

Notes: The question in the *World Values Survey* that measured the degree of trust in parliament was framed as follows: 'How much confidence you have in parliament: is it a great deal, quite a lot, not very much or none at all?' In the Eurobarometer surveys the standard question measuring trust in national parliaments was: 'Please tell me if you tend to trust or tend to not trust in Parliament?'

parliamentarism'; the same is also true if we compare the trust Portuguese deposit with the main political institutions, using the data collected in the 2002 and 2008 surveys.

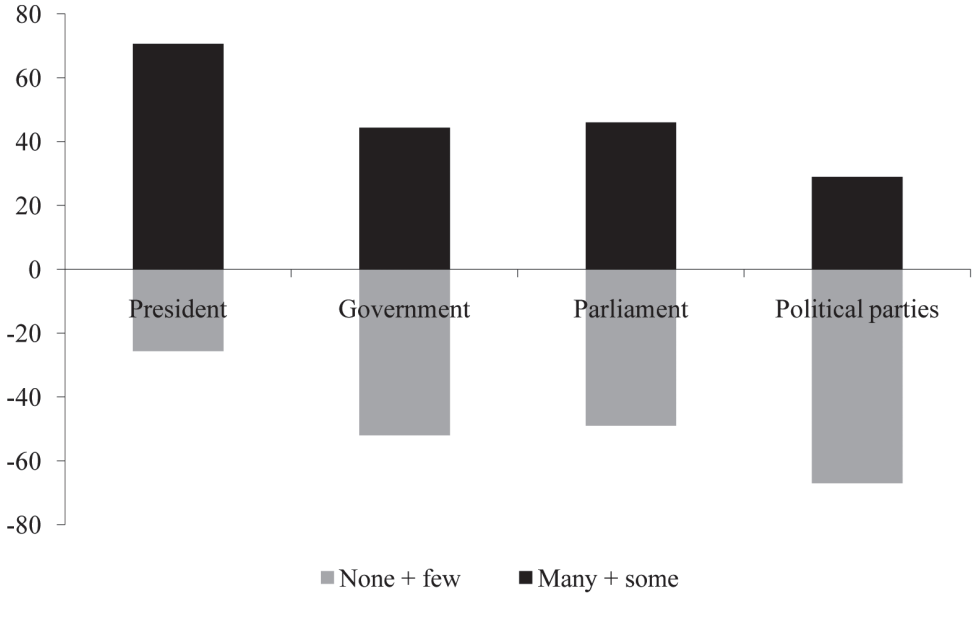
As Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate, among the political institutions considered in the 2002 and 2008 national mass surveys, parliament enjoyed the second-highest level of trust (42.4 and 46.0 per cent, respectively) after the presidency, closely followed by the support for the government (35.0 and 44.4 per cent), and very distant from the level of trust in political parties, whose profoundly negative image is evident (24 and 29 per cent).

Figure 1: Degree of trust in political institutions. Portugal 2002 (%)



Source: 2002 Mass survey in Freire et al. (2002).
Note: Excludes don't knows and no replies.

Figure 2: Degree of trust in political institutions. Portugal 2008 (%)



Source: Portuguese Mass Survey (2008) in Freire, Viegas and Seiceira (2009).
Note: Excludes don't knows and no replies

Independent variables: hypotheses and interpretations

Now that we have reviewed a number of the attempts to explain the decline of trust in political institutions in general and in parliament in particular, it is necessary to test some of their hypotheses. We need to determine what the predictors of trust are in the parliaments of the three southern European countries being studied here. This will involve a linear regression analysis in which the independent (or explanatory) variables considered to be theoretically important are grouped into four sets.

In addition to gender, the first of the sets includes a group of variables related to resources and social integration. These are age, education, marital status, employment situation, objective social class and habitat. As we saw in Inglehart's and Dalton's cultural approaches, education is a factor that favours the adoption of a more critical and sceptical attitude towards traditional authority, suggesting that those with higher levels of education will also be those who are most mistrustful of political institutions.

As for age, and again according to the hypothesis that is inherent to Inglehart's argument, we would expect that younger generations, who have grown up during a period of economic prosperity and physical security, and have been guided by post-materialist values, thus being used to acting with greater freedom and having more opportunities to express themselves as individuals, would be much more critical of and opposed to traditional political institutions. There is also a tendency, confirmed in many classical studies, for older people to place greater levels of trust in political and social institutions, whether for generational reasons or due to the longer period of political socialisation.

In respect of marital status and habitat, given the relationship Putnam described between the decline of social capital and social isolation as a result of the weakening of family and community bonds, we would expect that those individuals who live alone or who live in more urbanised areas tend to be less trustful of institutions.

Finally, social class will also affect levels of trust in parliament, in two distinct manners. Taking into account the hypothesis related to the breaking of "specific support", the lower a person's perception of their own social class, the more unfavourable their attitude will be in relation to the operation of the political system and the performance of its institutions. If an individual's social class can be regarded as an indicator of their prosperity and satisfaction with their standard of living, then this could also suggest a greater "specific support" for democratic institutions.

The second set comprises a series of variables that are related to the individual's values and political attitudes. Regarding the variable that measures the interest individuals have in political matters and the frequency with which they discuss politics and current affairs, expectations in relation to the direction of institutional trust tends to be ambiguous. On the one hand and according to the arguments presented by Inglehart and Dalton, it is to be expected that the more politically aware and mobilised individuals are, the more they will also be demanding and critical of the performance of the political institutions. On the other hand, it may also be that a greater interest in politics and the possession of greater cognitive resources are associated with a strong sense of internal political effectiveness and, therefore, individuals trust the institutions more.

Both the feeling of internal and external effectiveness should be associated with greater levels of trust in institutions. Internal effectiveness can be described as the reflection of the perception citizens have of themselves as political actors capable of understanding what is happening in the political sphere and who are able to formulate their own independent opinions. External effectiveness is the reflection of the positive perception that citizens have of the proximity and receptivity of politicians in relation to their interests, aspirations, and opinions.

According to the view expressed by Putnam, it is natural to expect that exposure to television news results in higher levels of mistrust in institutions, taking into account the transformation of the television news agenda into an ever more superficial, cynical and spectacular vision of political life.

As for the expectations regarding the individual's ideological self-placement on the left-right scale, these suggest that those who place themselves on the extremes of the ideological spectrum are those who tend to be least trusting of political institutions in general, and of parliament in particular. The variable that measures how people are attached to post-materialist values must move in the direction of the hypothesis proposed by Inglehart in relation to the effects of the value system's transition in the attitudes that individuals have regarding institutions and which include elements of scepticism, criticism, and cynicism.

The third set contains a group of variables that seek to determine the importance of "specific support" for the degree of trust in parliamentary institutions. Here the expectations travel in the following direction: the greater the individual economic privation and the more unfavourable the economy's assessment and general performance of the government, the lower the levels of trust in political institutions, including parliament.

The fourth set, which is included in our linear regression analysis, is deeply indebted to Putnam's argument on the decline of social capital. We test the impact of the variables —social trust, political trust and civic associationism and activism—on trust in parliament. According to Putnam we could admit that either interpersonal trust or institutional trust—which are no more than the product of a "sufficiently virtuous" society and, therefore of a "public good" that is accessible at the individual level—are associated with higher levels of trust in

the political institutions in general. This can also be said of civic associationism and activism—or, to use Putnam's terminology, of "secondary social capital", which is the product of relationships that emerge within and through participation in different types of associations.

Having outlined the independent variables used in our analytical model and having formulated our theoretical expectations for each of them, we now turn our attention to the results generated in each set for each of the three countries studied, namely Spain, Portugal and Italy.

Table 2. Predictors of citizens' trust in the parliaments of Spain, Italy and Portugal (2008)

Independent variables	Linear regression coefficients		
	Spain	Italy	Portugal
Model 1: Resources and social integration			
Gender [a]	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Age	0.107***	n.s.	0.092***
Marital status [b]	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Education	n.s.	0.119***	0.103***
Social class	n.s.	0.052**	n.s.
Habitat	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
R^2	0.019	0.050	0.030
Model 2: Attitudes and political integration			
Interest in /discuss politics	0.127***	0.234***	0.069**
Internal efficacy	n.a.	n.a.	n.s.
External efficacy	n.a.	n.a.	0,218***
Exposure TV news	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Ideological self-placement	n.s.	-0,103***	n.s.
Post-materialism index	n.s.	-0.066**	n.s.
R^2	0.039	0.108	0.089
R^2_{change}	[0.020]	[0.058]	[0.059]
Model 3: Specific support			
Employment status [c]	n.s.	n.s.	0.067**
Trust in government	0.548***	0.532***	0.435***
Support for incumbents [d]	0.065**	0.069**	0.072**
Assessment of the government's performance	n.a.	n.a.	0.065**
Assessment of the state of country's economy	n.a.	n.a.	0.106***
R^2	0.299	0.463	0.316
R^2_{change}	[0.260]	[0.355]	[0.227]
Model 4: Trust and social networks			
Social trust [e]	0.053*	ns	ns
Trust in institutions	0.314***	0.191***	0.449***
Associational membership /activism	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
R^2	0.378	0.492	0.461
R^2_{change}	[0.079]	[0.029]	[0.145]
N	1 200	1 012	1 343

Sources: Data elaborated by authors from World Values Survey (2005-2008), for Spain and Italy, and the Portuguese Mass Survey (2008) in Freire, Viegas and Seiceira (2009).

Notes: 1. The dependent variable is ordinal and measures the degree of trust citizens have in parliament, where 1=no trust and 4=much trust. **2.** The cells in this table show the standard coefficients of the linear regression analysis ( ). **3.** Levels of statistical significance are: *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001, n.s.= not significant **4.** Don't know and no reply responses are included in the analysis and treated statistically using the regression imputation method. **5.** Dummy variables are coded as follows: [a] 0 = male, 1=female; [b] 0=others, 1=married/ civil partnership; [c] reference category is being in paid employment; [d] 0=did not vote for the governing party in the most recent elections, 1=voted for the governing party in the most recent elections; [e] 0=most people are not trustworthy, 1=most people are trustworthy. **6.** The highest value of the variance inflation factor (VIF) was 1.960, which suggests there are no serious problems of multicolinearity. **7.** n.a.=not applicable: the information was not found among the variables.

Considering the variables that are aggregated in the first set, we observe that the values of explained variance are relatively low in each of the countries. This allows us to state that public trust in parliaments in these three southern European countries depends little on resources and social integration of their citizens and their influence on political socialisation standards. These are causal factors that are not susceptible to short-term change. It is worth noting that age is a significant predictor in Spain and Portugal, which corroborates Inglehart's view that the younger generation tends to place less trust in parliament.

The education variable had a significant explanatory value in Italy and Portugal, although in these cases it ran contrary to the theories advanced by Inglehart and Dalton regarding the influence of education level on the amount of trust citizens place in political institutions: those who most trust parliament are those with higher levels of education. In the Italian case, social class also can be said to be a predictor (although with weak explanatory power) of levels of trust in parliament, which suggests that the level of trust increases as the social status of the respondents rises.

An examination of the results from the second set is somewhat harder when we recognise that some of our initial expectations are not confirmed by statistical analysis. Firstly, while interest in politics is a powerful predictor of trust levels in parliament in Spain and Italy, this is not the case in Portugal where its explanatory value was less significant.

If in Portugal internal effectiveness has no explanatory value in relation to the trust citizens place in the Assembly of the Republic, this is not the case in relation to the external political effectiveness. In this latter case the results are entirely according to our expectations: the greater the perception that politicians are open to the interests and opinions of the electorate, the higher the level of trust in parliament will be.

As we can see in Table 2, it is only in Italy that ideological self-placement on the left-right scale and post-materialist values represent powerful predictors of trust in the national parliament, while in both cases the direction of the determining coefficients meet with our initial hypothesis: it is those citizens who position themselves more to the right of the political spectrum and who share post-materialist values (rather that materialist ones) who are least trusting of parliament. However, it is important to note that the weak explanatory value of predictors of trust in parliaments included in the first set are, except perhaps in the case of Portugal and Italy, poorly compensated by the political attitude variables of the second set.

Table 2 also shows that the third set is the one in which the explained variance is the most important in all three countries, also identifying that the individual-level determinants that most consistently and powerfully affect the trust citizens have in their national parliaments. Moreover, these determinants are associated with "specific support". Concerning trust in government and incumbents in the three countries, the direction of causality is not only the one expected, but it is also statistically more significant.

Considering the variables that are only included in the Portuguese mass survey (i.e., "Assessment of the government's performance" and "Assessment of the state of country's economy"), the suggestion that indicators of "specific support" represent the best parliament trust predictors seems to gain renewed strength. I.e., both positive assessment of the government's performance and positive evaluation of the state of the country's economy are (as expected) factors that boost trust in parliament.

In the fourth set of variables we note that, with the exception of Italy (fourth greatest), this is where the rise of the coefficient of determination (R^2) is the second greatest. However, it remains far short of that found in the third set, which includes variables linked to "specific support". In relation to the variables considered in this set, derived from the theories of social capital, we note that only institutional trust represents a powerful predictor of the amount of trust citizens have for their legislative body—this being more evident in Spain and Portugal than in Italy. That is, the more people trust other political institutions (parliament not considered in the set), the more they also trust parliament.

At least some of these are aspects which political reformers can alter, and thus there is some reason for optimism. Particularly in the Portuguese case, this can happen through the strengthening of parliament's powers of legitimation, through bringing parliament closer to civil society (Barreto 1990; 1992; Leston-Bandeira 1998; 2002a; 2002b; 2003), or through reform of the electoral system to reduce the excessive power parties have over representation, so as to promote a greater proximity between the elected and the electorate (Freire, Meirinho and Moreira, 2008). However, there is also reason for a certain pessimism because the data show that trust in the parliamentary institution is far from being autonomous and independent of the trust citizens place in the entire set of political institutions. But again: these are aspects which politicians can alter by increasing the performance of the political system and the macro-economic performance of the country.

Final considerations

Beginning with the view that it is necessary to integrate two apparently distinct theoretical approaches to the study of parliament as an institution— one that concentrates on examining

the parliament's functions (and which dominates the literature on legislative studies) and another that examines public support for the democratic regime and its institutions (and which dominates the literature on political attitudes and behaviour)—we have analysed the level of trust in parliament from a comparative perspective and identified the individual determinants (or predictors) of this trust from both the synchronic and the comparative perspective, albeit one that was limited to Spain, Portugal and Italy.

In relation to trust in parliamentary institutions across Europe, we can affirm that these are relatively modest levels, registering a decline that became more marked between the beginning of the 1980s and the end of the 1990s than between 2000-2004 and 2005-2008. Regarding the Portuguese case, we also noted that there is a relatively modest level of trust in parliament. However, this fact does not allow us to confirm Portugal's allegedly 'anti-parliamentarian' political culture, which also finds no support in the comparative perspective: the low levels of trust in parliament we found in Portugal, vis-à-vis the higher averages we found in Northern Europe, are nevertheless well above the averages in Eastern Europe, and even above or very close to those found in countries like the UK and Spain.

As for the individual-level determinants of trust in parliaments—in the case of Spain, Portugal and Italy—the main conclusion to be drawn is that the factors associated with "specific support" and the factors linked to "institutional trust" contribute most towards an explanation of levels of trust in parliament as an institution. Overall, there is reason for some optimism: these are all aspects which politicians can alter either by political reform, to bring parliaments and political institutions closer to citizens and civil society, and/or by improving the performance of the political system and the macro-economic performance of the country, thus boosting citizens' trust in political institutions, in general, and in parliaments, in particular.

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Appendix.

Table 3. Description of independent variables used in the linear regression analysis (Portugal 2008 and Spain / Italy 2005–2008)

Type of variables	Variables: values and measures	
Dependent variable: Confidence in parliament	1 = None 4 = Much	Ordinal
Independent variables:		
Block 1. Resources and social integration		
Gender	0 = Female 1 = Male	Dummy variable
Age	Number of years	Scale
Education	Highest level of education	Scale
Marital status	0 = Other 1 = Married or civil partnership	Dummy variable
Social class	1=Working class 5=Upper class	Ordinal
Habitat	From ≤2000 to ≥5000 inhabitants	Ordinal
Block 2. Attitudes and political integration		
Interest in/discuss in politics	1 = Low 4 = High	Scale
Internal efficacy (1)	1 = Minimum 4 = Maximum	Ordinal
External efficacy (2)	1 = Minimum 4 = Maximum	Ordinal
Exposure TV news	1 = Never 5 = Every day	Ordinal
Ideological self-placement	0 = Left 10 = Right	Scale
Post- materialist index (3)	1 = Materialism 5 = Post-materialism	Scale
Block 3. Attitudes on specific support		
Employment situation		
Paid employment	**Reference category**	Dummy variable
Unemployed (seeking work)	1 and 0 for the other six cases	
Unemployed (not seeking work)	1 and 0 for the other six cases	
Student	1 and 0 for the other six cases	

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Table 3. Description of independent variables used in the linear regression analysis (Portugal 2008 and Spain / Italy 2005–2008)

Incapacitated	1 and 0 for the other six cases	
Retired	1 and 0 for the other six cases	
Unpaid domestic work	1 and 0 for the other six cases	
Voted for party government (last elections)	0 = No 1 = Yes	Dummy variable
Trust in the government	1 = None 4 = Much	Ordinal
Assessment of the government's performance	1 = Very bad 5 = Very good	Ordinal
Assessment of the state of country's economy	1 = Very bad 5 = Very good	Ordinal
Block 4. Trust and social networks		
Social Trust	0 = Most people can´t be trustworthy 1 = Most people are trustworthy	Dummy variable
Trust in institutions	1 = Absolute trust 4 = Total mistrust	Ordinal

Sources: Data elaborated by authors from World Values Survey (2005-2008), for Spain and Italy, and the Portuguese Mass Survey (2008) in Freire, Viegas and Seiceira (2009).

Notes: Measures of the independent variables: (1) Internal efficiency sentiment = to what extent do you totally disagree, disagree, agree or totally agree with the following statement? «Politics is a very complicated subject, only specialists can understand it»; (2) External efficiency sentiment = To what extent do you totally disagree, disagree, agree or totally agree with the following statement «Politicians do not care about people like me»; (3) Regarding Portugal, adherence to post-materialistic values is shown by the degree to which the respondents agree with the following affirmations: a) «Stronger measures should be taken in order to protect the environment»; b) «Same-sex marriage should be permitted by law»; c) «Women should be free to decide about abortion»; d) « Immigrants are beneficial to Portugal's economy». Answer options to these items vary between 1, corresponding to «totally disagree», to 5, equivalent to "totally agree". As for the cases of Spain and Italy, adherence to post-materialistic values indicates the respondents' degree of acceptability towards the following: a) homosexuality; b) abortion; c) divorce; d) euthanasia. Answers are measured through a scale from 1 to 10, 1 meaning «entirely unacceptable» and 10 meaning «entirely acceptable».