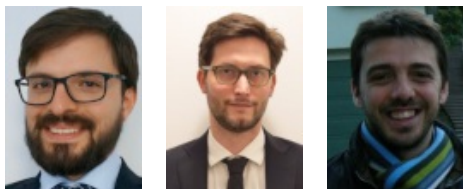


Does increasing public trust in the EU's institutions undermine support for national institutions?



Several studies have identified a link between the public's trust in national institutions and their trust in the EU's institutions. Yet the effect of this link is unclear, with some studies finding that an increase in trust in national institutions boosts trust in the EU's institutions, and other studies identifying the opposite relationship. Drawing on a new study, [Goran Dominioni](#), [Alberto Quintavalla](#), and [Alessandro Romano](#) explain that the relationship between trust in national and EU institutions is bilateral, almost always asymmetric, and that spillover effects change over time.

Public trust in political institutions is a key determinant of the political life of the European Union. Importantly, in the European Union, governance is shared among institutions that operate at the supranational and the national level, and changes in the trust in an institution situated at one level can affect trust in institutions situated at the other level. But what is the effect, direction, and intensity of these spillovers? In a [recent study](#), we answer this question.

[Research](#) has long shown that changes in political trust in national institutions affect institutions at other levels, but the effect of these spillovers is debated. According to the so-called 'congruence theory', changes in trust in national institutions should affect public trust towards European institutions in the same direction. For instance, if trust towards a country's national parliament increases, trust in the EU's institutions should also increase. On the contrary, the so-called 'compensation theory' states that a change in trust in national institutions should produce the opposite effect when it comes to trust in European institutions. For example, if trust in a country's national parliament increases, we might find that public trust in the European Commission would decrease.

Existing research provides mixed results that support both theories. The conflicting findings derive from an incomplete understanding of inter-institutional dynamics. These theories implicitly assume that spillovers only go from the national to the European level, and that their effect is constant over time. On the contrary, we show that the impact of spillovers can change over time and space and that spillovers are bidirectional. That is, changes in trust in the European Union also affect the national level.

Consequently, our first contribution is to propose a taxonomy of possible forms of interactions among European and national institutions. We say that two institutions are interacting when there are trust spillovers among them. Moreover, we say that the kind of interaction between two institutions is defined in terms of the direction (that can be either unilateral or bilateral) and the 'sign' (that can be either positive or negative) of the spillovers between these institutions. We show that there are eight possible types of interactions among institutions at the two levels of governance.

The table below describes the eight types of interactions. Four of these interactions are unilateral. That is, spillovers only go from one level to the other. Despite the fact that the literature has focused on unilateral spillovers, we do not find any evidence that these forms of interactions emerge. The other four are bilateral. These bilateral interactions can be either symmetric ('bilateral congruence' and 'bilateral compensation') or asymmetric ('asymmetric interactions of type I' and 'asymmetric interactions of type II').

An interaction is symmetric if changes in trust in national and European institutions produce the same kind of spillover effect in each direction. For instance, according to our results, between 2008 and 2012, the national parliament of Belgium and the European Parliament entered into a relationship of bilateral compensation. Here, an increase in trust in Belgium's national parliament would be expected to produce a negative spillover onto the European Parliament and an increase in trust in the European Parliament would be expected to produce a negative spillover onto the national parliament.

Alternatively, an interaction is asymmetric when changes in trust in national and European institutions produce the opposite kind of spillover effect in each direction. For example, our results show the existence of an asymmetric interaction between the national parliament of Denmark and the European Parliament after 2012. In this case, an increase in trust in the national parliament would be expected to generate a positive spillover onto the European Parliament, but an increase in trust in the European Parliament would be expected to generate a negative spillover onto the national parliament.

Table: Eight interactions between trust in national and European institutions

A change in the level of trust in a European institution creates:

		A change in the level of trust in a European institution creates:			
		A trust spillover of the same sign towards a national institution	No effect on the trust towards national institution	A trust spillover of the opposite sign towards a national institution	
A change in the level of trust in a national institution creates:	EU National				
	A trust spillover of the same sign towards a EU institution	Bilateral congruence	Unilateral congruence	Asymmetric interactions type I	
	No effect on the trust towards a EU institution	Reversed unilateral congruence	Neutralism	Reversed unilateral compensation	
	A trust spillover of the opposite sign towards a EU institution	Asymmetric interactions type II	Unilateral compensation	Bilateral compensation	

Note: For more information, see the authors' accompanying study in [European Union Politics](#)

Our second contribution is to test which types of interaction emerge between the national parliaments of 15 member states and the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Central Bank in the period 2000-2015. Our results indicate that spillovers between national parliaments and EU institutions are bilateral, almost always asymmetric, and their sign changes over time. Thus, the two predominant theories of trust spillovers fail to accurately describe the types of interactions that we observe.

These findings have important implications, since they show that simultaneously increasing public trust in both European and national institutions might be a complex undertaking. Take, for example, the case of the United Kingdom. After 2009, we find an asymmetric interaction between the national parliament and the European Commission and European Parliament, where an increase in trust towards national institutions reduces trust towards EU ones. Now assume that British authorities wanted to start a campaign to increase trust in the national parliament. If successful, such a campaign would have undermined trust in the EU's institutions. On the contrary, an action aimed at increasing trust in the EU would have also increased trust in the national parliament.

We also believe that our findings call for further research on two fronts. First, research should focus on understanding the determinants of the interactions. This will facilitate the task of building trust in national and EU institutions by creating mutualistic interactions. Second, we observe that interaction dynamics are similar in some countries. For instance, this is the case of interactions between the national parliaments of Italy and Spain in the period 2000-2012. Future research could study whether there are common determinants of these dynamics.

Note: The above draws on the authors' published work in [European Union Politics](#) and was [first published](#) on LSE EUROPP – European Politics and Policy. Featured image credit: [CC BY 4.0: © European Union 2019 – Source: EP](#)

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