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Trust in a polarized age: a reply to critics

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ABSTRACT

In this piece, Vallier responds to critiques of his 2020 book, *Trust in a Polarized Age*, offered by Mutz, Méon, Kukathas, and Weithman. He first restates the main argument of the book. Mutz and Méon offer criticisms to some of his empirical claims about polarization and trust; in response, Vallier concedes while stressing that one aim of the book is to develop an approach to defending liberal order that updates as these empirical literatures expand and improve. Much of the work Mutz and Méon discuss can be integrated into the book's broader project. Kukathas and Weithman criticize Vallier's normative claims, which Vallier defends.

KEYWORDS Liberalism; trust; social trust; political trust; political polarization; public reason

Introduction

Allow me to begin by thanking the journal and my interlocutors for helping me improve my thinking and my work. I begin by explaining how I came to write *Trust in a Polarized Age* (Vallier, 2020). The background helps me answer my critics.

I am attracted to social contract theory as an account of the justification of political order. But social contract theories disagree about which social relationships the social contract should produce (Southwood, 2010). On one extreme, Hobbesian theories postulate bare cooperation. People act from self-interest by forming an agreement that ends open conflict and allows for mutual benefit. Kantian theories, in contrast, postulate a much richer relation between persons, like ties of justice and civic friendship.

With time, I developed serious concerns about each approach. I worried Hobbesian theories lacked ambition. Societies can do more than merely settle disputes and avoid violent outcomes. I also thought that appeals to instrumental rationality could not produce a stable bargain between diverse contractors (Gaus, 2011). Gerald Gaus (ch 2) persuasively argued that a Hobbesian sovereign cannot discourage defection in enough cases to

create order. Persons must already have richer relations with one another. If they value these relations, they can avoid acting from self-interest alone.

I find Kantian social contract theories overly political. They establish political relations like citizenship or justice. But social contracts can establish cooperation between people who are not fellow citizens and who disagree about justice.

Gaus had related concerns. From his earliest work, he pioneered a third alternative. This relationship is more ambitious than bare cooperation, but less ambitious than civic friendship and citizenship. Gaus called these *moral relations*. Moral relations are relationships between normal moral agents that presuppose reactive attitudes. People adhere to common social norms (Bicchieri, 2006), especially moral norms (VanSchoelandt, 2018), and when one party violates the rules, others have warranted resentment and indignation. They may even punish violators.

If all we know about an agreement is that it is instrumentally rational – in the narrow sense of pursuing one's personal goals without reference to others – we do not know whether defection licenses reactive attitudes. (Instrumental rationality in the broad sense could include the benefits and costs of reactive attitudes in the payoff structure.) We only know that one party thought their interests changed or perhaps acted against their interests. Resentment and indignation might be inapt. By contrast, a Kantian bargain limits the appropriateness of the reactive attitudes to those who can secure an unrealistic degree of agreement on a substantive conception of justice.

Gaus argued that we have reason to value moral relations. He also argued that, once we value them, we will want to agree upon shared terms of social life. (Though Gaus revised his account of such agreement throughout his career.) I won't explain the Gaussian view further, as I have elsewhere (Vallier, 2022). But studying Gaus's work led me to ask a simple question: what are moral relations? Gaus never clearly defines them. However, he says that moral relations include love, friendship, and *trust*.

In his past work, Gaus wrote extensively about love and friendship (Gaus, 1990). I agreed with much of what he said. But people in large, diverse societies do not share love and friendship, as their relations are too diffuse. Here Gaus would agree, of course. Yet the candidates for moral relations available to members of a large, diverse social order have contracted. Which relations remained?

Gaus had almost nothing to say about trust, but trust is an excellent candidate for moral relations. It can hold between diverse persons. So I sought terms of a social contract that could establish both social trust (trust in strangers) and political trust (trust in government). My goal was to find constitutional rights that diverse perspectives can endorse. By observing those rights, diverse persons signal to one another that they honor these

rights from moral concern, which allows diverse persons to depend on one another.

I won't review that argument here. I worked it out in *Must Politics Be War?* (Vallier, 2019), the predecessor to the subject of the symposium, *Trust in a Polarized Age*.

As I embarked on the trust project, I realized that the empirical literatures should inform my inquiry. Social scientists know something about sustaining trust. If I appealed to this literature, I could explore whether liberal institutions maintain moral relations. In earlier work, I argued that liberal rights could rationally justify trust, such that, if persons act for their best and knowable practical reasons, they will sustain trust. But whether liberal rights can create social trust is an empirical question. We want to know whether institutions that justify trust can cause it in the real world.

Towards this end, I developed notions of trust that attempt to map onto the empirical literature. The hope? Create an interdisciplinary study of trust by developing common concepts. Such an approach could vindicate liberal order on contractarian and empirical grounds simultaneously. The trust literature cannot prove much. Yet, it suggests that some liberal rights sustain trust in the real world.

I defend some causal claims based on the empirical trust literatures. Here my goal was simple. 1. Survey the trust literature on particular institutions. 2. See if the literature on that institution contains a consensus. Do researchers think the institution causes trust? Or does trust help create the institution? I then bring political philosophy back into my argument. I claim that publicly justified institutions (institutions justified to diverse perspectives) can cause *and justify* trust. And so, they would produce *real trust* for the *right reasons*.

Many social contract theorists say little about which relationships a social contract creates. They often make causal claims about stability with crude models (if they have a model at all). I wanted to enrich the discussion by introducing the empirical literature.

We cannot draw firm conclusions, but we can make progress by aligning the trust literature with social contract theory. We have the foundations for an interdisciplinary study of trust that allows for political philosophers to make clear use of the vast empirical trust literatures. Even if my particular arguments fail, I hope that will be the enduring core of the book.

Further background for answering my critics

The replies, as you may have read, are quite good. Let me begin with some concessions.

My book is too optimistic. I argued that trust and political polarization might be in a doom loop. I then argued that the liberal policy toolkit (individual rights, markets, and democracy) could arrest this decline.

I thought the US had exited a high trust, low polarization equilibrium into *disequilibrium*. The US was in decline, but we were in *motion* and might reverse course. I completed the book in 2019. This was before COVID, the 2020 election, and January 6th, 2021. These events hurt my project. COVID did not unite us. And bad actors sowed doubt in the 2020 election results, which led to a riot in the US Capitol.

We may not be in motion. We may have arrived at a new equilibrium of lower trust and higher polarization. Or, continued disequilibrium may produce ever-worse outcomes. Either way, recent events suggest things were worse than they seemed four years ago.

However, I remain confident in my most central claim. It is this: liberal order has no ingrained tendency toward falling trust. Critics of liberalism postulate such a tendency (Deneen, 2018), but the best evidence suggests they are in error.

I never claim to show that institutional reforms *will* restore trust or reduce polarization. Instead, I surveyed expert consensus and relayed it to readers. Sometimes, I imply that these institutions have enough power to make a big difference. I could have provided further support for my quantitative claims. Here, as we will see, Méon is right to press. But in rebuffing liberalism's critics, I stand by my main arguments. Reversing falling trust may be beyond us. But I have shown how one can determine whether we can reverse falling trust.

Now to the details.

Response to Mutz

Prof. Mutz rightly objects to my discussion of polarization as oversimplified. I happily concede some of her points. My thinking on polarization since 2019 has led me to distinguish between more forms of polarization. Based on these new forms, I would now like to advance a range of more specific and modest theses by identifying more forms of *partisan divergence*—my term for the class of political phenomena many call 'polarization.' We must, of course, differentiate between ideological and affective divergence. People can cluster into opposing groups based on what they believe. Or they can cluster because they dislike people in the opposing political party.

We must also distinguish between divergence in *attitudes* and divergence in *membership*. People can sort in two ways. They can align themselves with like-minded groups and individuals or like-minded locales.

I now see polarization as measuring attitudes and sorting. And sorting measures membership of two types – associative and geographic. Sarah sorts by association when she joins a party or enters a relationship that aligns better with her values. She sorts by geography when she moves to a locale where people share her values. People can also sort based on affect or ideology.

Finally, we must distinguish between divergence at the mass and elite levels. Elites appear more polarized in both affect and ideology. Mutz is correct about the mass level: people are not polarized by ideology but exhibit affective polarization and have sorted into like-minded groups, especially political parties.

Partisan divergence thus decomposes into twelve distinct phenomena. One can advance many causal hypotheses once we see these conceptual distinctions. Which forms of partisan divergence cause the others? Elite ideological polarization could lead to mass affective, associative sorting, to give one example.

Table 1 and Table 2 distinguish six types of divergence at the mass and elite levels.

I also now distinguish between more forms of trust. I focus on how trust attitudes arise from or with emotion or affect. I did not draw this distinction until recently because I think trust always involves belief, and so I adopt a 'doxastic' theory that defines trust as possible apart from the presence of emotion. Non-doxastic forms of trust involve mere emotional vulnerability. Infants likely lack doxastic trust but have non-doxastic trust, as they trust their mothers, but may lack beliefs.

I have long viewed social and institutional trust as doxastic (Vallier, 2019). Affect accompanies beliefs, to be sure, yet trust in government and society seem doxastic because they are attitudes about distant persons and institutions. Often when we reflect on how much we trust government, we can do so in a cool moment. Affect need not accompany our reflection.

But hold on. Suppose that social and institutional trust are doxastic and *need not* generate affective responses. Still, affect can surely be a *cause or consequence* of trust. Indeed, trust can even be a belief always accompanied by affect. What matters for our purposes, however, is not whether trust *is* an

Table 1. Forms of mass divergence.

Forms of Mass Divergence →	Polarization	Associative Sorting	Geographic Sorting
Affective	Affective Polarization	Affective Associative Sorting	Affective Geographical Sorting
Cognitive	Cognitive Polarization	Cognitive Associative Sorting	Cognitive Geographical Sorting

Table 2. Forms of elite divergence.

Forms of Elite Divergence →	Polarization	Associative Sorting	Geographic Sorting
Affective	Affective Polarization	Affective Associative Sorting	Affective Geographical Sorting
Cognitive	Cognitive Polarization	Cognitive Associative Sorting	Cognitive Geographical Sorting

affective state, but the causal relationships between trust and affect. Since, in many cases, trust is tied to affect, we must attend to affect to build trust. Affect will impact some forms of trust more than others, and different people may form trust attitudes based on cognitive or affective factors.

Finally, we can separate trust at the mass and elite levels, much as we do for partisan divergence.

We must now grapple with eight categories of trust, more forms of trust than I noted in the book. Trust can be social or institutional, accompanied or not by affect, and held at the mass or elite levels.

I tried to link the trust and polarization literatures. Yet I only began the process. The future of trust and polarization research will have to distinguish causal hypotheses. Twelve forms of divergence could cause eight types of trust, and the causal arrow could point in the other direction, or causation could run both ways. Trust type A could cause divergence type B and vice versa. (Indeed, they may cause one another.)

We can now distinguish *at least* 192 distinct causal hypotheses. And that assumes we can set aside two sets of dynamics: causal dynamics between types of divergence and between types of trust.

The book only suggests how to connect the two sets of phenomena. I now affirm four specific hypotheses. The literature directly supports two of them. The others are more speculative.

We can draw two hypotheses from the present literature: affective polarization and associative sorting can reduce political trust in opposing party officials. As we sort and polarize, we will trust out-group representatives less.

The more speculative hypotheses are these. First, mass affective polarization can reduce mass social trust, and some recent evidence points in this direction (Lee, 2022). Second, social trust may limit affective polarization. Persons inclined to trust will develop weaker negative emotions towards one another.

All these claims need further testing and research, research I am conducting at present. Indeed, the hypotheses need considerable simplification to yield a helpful measure.

Response to Méon

Méon worries I say too little about the amount of trust that liberal institutions create, as trust effects may be too small. Méon then adds that social and political trust are internally heterogeneous. The surveys I discuss are cross-national aggregates of trust attitudes among citizens of specific nations. But real trust isn't an aggregate phenomenon. The bulk of Méon's reply reviews data supporting his arguments. Authors published some of the papers after I completed the book, so I learned a lot from his discussion.

Méon is right. I do not have enough to say about these questions of quantities and heterogeneities and could have addressed them further in the book.

Trust in a Polarized Age focuses on pushing the public reason literature in new directions. If we read the book this way, Méon's concerns become recommendations for how to advance the project further. *Trust in a Polarized Age* is not my final attempt to explore whether the trust literature helps defend liberal order, so I welcome his arguments.

Public reason liberals think public justification produces social stability in modern, diverse societies. But the arguments fail. The principal works in the literature offer vague informal models of social stability, and they treat stability as one phenomenon without separating its elements. For example, trust is a major stabilizing force, yet public reason liberals give it almost no attention.

Some public reason liberals will resist this claim on the grounds that their models hold for an ideal society, which provide bases of stability immune from empirical refutation. I explain in the book why I think this approach is misguided, as it ignores the character of the moral relations that provide the best foundation for public reason. The best foundation for public reason will specify the form and degree of idealizations we use to formulate an ideal social order.

The literature also stresses the stability of a society's 'basic structure.' Theorists do not show how stability (or trust) arises for parts of the basic structure. They do not focus on particular institutions like the economy. Some may respond that the stability of institutions is all that matters. However, stability of the whole can withstand great degradation in some of the parts, and liberals should also care about the integrity of those parts.

Most public reason liberals make claims about how ideal human order operates, but their claims float free of social scientific research. The best work relies chiefly on formal models.

I wrote the book to fix these gaps in the literature. *Trust in a Polarized Age* identifies distinct liberal institutions as causes and consequences of trust, introduces polarization as a destabilizing factor, and suggests how these phenomena might causally connect. I surveyed the trust literature to wed it with liberal thought.

Méon is right that causal identifications need further support, and I hope to provide it someday. But I am encouraged by his piece. If the book only shows how empirical work on trust can help us understand liberal order, that is no mean feat.

Mutz and Méon have pushed me to distinguish, far more carefully, between the claims I make about trust. I hope they and my reader can see the road ahead for the project and precisely where I need to fill in the gaps.

Response to Kukathas

Prof. Kukathas rejects as unrealistic a society based on trust for the right reasons. The challenges I take to be ones of feasibility. A public justification can fail, or one could hold unbeknownst to us, and either way, public justification cannot resolve our disputes. More concretely, the US may be in a low trust, high polarization equilibrium, which means restoring trust is more challenging than I let on. Kukathas also thinks my trust-based conception of social unity is too narrow. I ignore less rational facets of human psychology in creating social cohesion, like a society's belief in a shared narrative.

These are reasonable concerns, but I can answer them. I begin by reviewing the form of non-ideal theorizing the book lays out. My goal is to show that liberal order has the unique capacity to sustain trust for the right reasons. Put another way: there is a close, feasible world where liberal order is stable. If so, liberalism has no robust tendency to fall into lower trust and high polarization.

A feasible world is one where people have familiar cognitive and motivational imperfections, but humans can still work together given favorable conditions. The book does not argue that we can easily reach this feasible world, as some societies may face substantial transition costs. I see my primary contribution as showing that liberal order has no robust tendency to decay. And so, it is reasonable to pursue policies to help us reach that nearby social world. In short, I describe a *non-ideal ideal*, one that tells us what sort of society to pursue if we want to trust each other and enjoy the benefits.

I say certain institutions and policies create trust in the real world, but I made this claim to provide a feasibility proof for liberal order. The book does not say that the US can solve its trust and polarization challenges on the cheap. We can hope to solve these challenges within the liberal policy toolkit. The world I describe is feasible for us.

Kukathas identifies many critical barriers to a stable liberal order. But they do not show that a liberal order of trust for the right reasons is infeasible.

Let's further explore one of Kukathas's arguments to this effect. Suppose that a public justification for a law exists, but people cannot detect it. If this happens often, we need institutions that reveal public justifications.

In lieu of detecting public justifications, what are we to do? We fall back on our own perspectives and end up with a *modus vivendi* order. Nothing in public reason shows that *modus vivendis* cannot exist. Nor can one show that a publicly justified policy cannot become a *modus vivendi*. Public reason liberals must do more to show how the theory guides transition out of a *modus vivendi*. But I take myself to have described some ways of forestalling such social decay.

Next, we may well be in a bad spot in the US, but that does not threaten my view. Public reason liberals should also pay more attention to ritual and

narrative. They too create social cohesion. I have criticized Gaus's model of public reason for omitting civil religion (Vallier, 2016). Civil religion can help assure us that society is moving in the right direction, which gives people grounds for continuing to live together on fair terms.

My defense of liberalism strengthens if we recognize that public justification motivates action. In Gaus's final work, he identifies a 'public justification effect' (Gaus, 2021). Some empirical literature suggests people will obey moral rules more often when internalized. They may adopt and internalize norms that are not justified for them, but these internalizations cannot survive rational challenges, whereas publicly justified norms can. So, we should not discount that public justification can have real causal effects.

Contra Kukathas, the path towards a liberal society rooted in trust for the right reasons is hard but remains feasible.

Response to Weithman

I have enjoyed Prof. Weithman's review of my work and profited from his rich books on public reason and liberal order. He asks insightful questions and answering them always requires a bit of work. But let me try.

Weithman worries that my project differs from the social contract tradition. I argue liberal order can sustain trust for the right reasons among diverse persons. I rest public justification on what people take to be valid moral requirements and not on what are, in fact, valid ethical requirements. But the social contract tradition seeks valid moral requirements that societies must follow to establish peace, legitimacy, or justice.

My understanding of the social contract tradition owes much to Gaus, but Gaus would not accept the distinction Weithman draws. The reason is complex, and I explain it only to help answer Weithman's questions.

Gaus thought the point of morality is to help us maintain valued 'moral relations' with others. These include love, friendship, and trust. They require observing deontic norms that constitute moral relations. Unless one respects publicly justified norms, one cannot have good moral relations with others.

Gaus took the norms internal to moral relations to constitute all social morality. A challenge: we can question the value of moral relations. We must appeal to valid moral requirements to do so, meaning morality must include these higher requirements.

Gaus rejected this challenge. He thought it psychologically impossible to question whether we should value moral relations. He gives a kind of transcendental argument to this effect in *The Order of Public Reason* (Gaus, 2011). We cannot reject having moral relations with others, so we must stick with the norms that make up those relations.

Here Gaus adopts a kind of moral constructivism. This constructivism is less ambitious than Rawls's account. Both based valid moral requirements on an

account of moral personality, but Gaus tied public justification to established moral relations. Rawls saw things differently. Persons can have duties to others because of their status as persons, so moral relations do not circumscribe all valid moral requirements. Hence Rawls's discussion of natural duties (Rawls, 1971).

I am a Gaussian public reason liberal in only a strict sense. Where we value moral relations, we should observe publicly justified norms, and these norms indeed make up those relations. My project extends Gaus's by arguing that public justification is internal to trust.

Yet I reject Gaus's transcendental argument (Vallier, 2016). We can stand outside moral relations and ask whether we should value them. I won't rehearse my argument but only note the implications. Valid moral requirements rest on a theistic form of natural law theory, but natural law provides objective moral reasons to maintain moral relations with others. Now we introduce the core Gaussian dictum: to maintain moral relations, observe publicly justified norms. In two steps, natural law requires following public justification; valid norms justify following taken-as-valid norms.

I am an unapologetic non-naturalist moral realist who places moral relations at the heart of morality. Our most profound moral requirements are to maintain moral relations with others, for we are to live in ties of love, friendship, and trust.

I think this principle draws from the Christian religion. We are to create peace and reconciliation between persons, and we should grow close to others in love and friendship. These objective moral requirements drive us to care about subjective moral requirements.

My claim is not as mysterious as it sounds. Consider any intimate relationship where people disagree about how to live together. We go along with what we regard as the wrong decisions of our beloved or friend. We know that the relationship matters more than the issue at hand. To sustain the relationship, we distance ourselves from our private moral judgments and doubt whether our grasp of moral reality is superior to that of those we love. And so, sometimes, objective morality leads us away from it, though not in the main. A paradox for philosophers, yes. But any good friend, romantic partner, or parent lives it.

Weithman views the social contract tradition as searching for valid moral requirements. Fair enough. But my project resembles the social contract of Hobbes and Locke (Hobbes, 1994; Locke, 1988). Hobbes and Locke were natural law theorists, if of an odd sort. Both allowed that natural laws were divine commands, and so do not hold in virtue of facts about human relations. They are, at least in part, divine directives designed to lead to our personal flourishing.

Natural law leads us to construct a voice of public reason. For Locke, this sovereign society appoints a government as its agent, where Hobbes thought the sovereign was a ruler or ruling body. But both thought natural law leads us to

create an organization to which we submit our private judgment. We observe norms that we, on our own, deem mistaken. Why? To sustain peace and social cooperation, and for Locke, to create a public trust. Locke understood that natural law requires sustaining relations of trust and trust requires a complex agreement on the terms of social life. Locke is closer to my view of the complex structure of interpersonal morality. (Though I prefer Thomistic to Lockean foundations for natural law).

Here's Weithman's first question. How do I distinguish between valid moral rules and taken-to-be-valid moral rules? I have answered. Natural law provides valid moral rules, and some natural laws require maintaining moral relations with others. Next, following Gaus, maintaining moral relations requires observing publicly justified norms, and public reason provides taken-to-be-valid moral norms.

Weithman's second question is how I see my project fitting into the social contract tradition. I have answered that question, too: I hew closer to the social contract theory of Hobbes and Locke.

To answer Weithman, I have had to outline the future direction of my thinking. I sketch this in *Must Politics Be War?* I explain how social trust gives rise to a unique form of moral normativity. We stand under a valid moral rule to establish trust for the right reasons. But such trust requires observing publicly justified norms – taken-to-be-valid norms.

Conclusion

I thank the participants for helping refine my project. I will expand on my claims about polarization, and with time, I will have more to say about quantitative measures of trust. I accept these challenges. But the promise of the project remains. We can better defend liberal order by synthesizing political philosophy and the social science of trust.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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