

# Political scandal, online participation and the rebuilding of institutional legitimacy: The case of the Estonian Citizens' Assembly

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## Abstract

The Estonian Citizens' Assembly (ECA) was initiated in late 2012 as a direct consequence of a legitimacy crisis of Estonian political parties and representative institutions. The spark igniting this crisis was the unravelling of a scheme of illegal party financing. The response from the governmental institutions took the form of a democratic innovation drawing on public crowd-sourcing and deliberative mini-publics. This study is conducted on the basis of a broad survey among the participants in the culminating deliberative process of the ECA (n=847). The focus of this paper is on the relationship between citizen participation and political trust. Two main research questions guides this paper: (1) How has participants vertical and social trust developed in relation to their participation in the ECA?, and (2) What factors explain variations of change in trust among participants? While existing research questions whether citizens engagement in political participation functions as a source of trust, participatory processes alike the ECA are continually being initiated with the explicit aim of impeding developments of growing public distrust and fostering a greater trust in governmental institutions.

## Introduction

Over the course of recent decades, major challenges to representative institutions have offered a breeding ground for reflection on the future of democratic governance. Concerns usually refers to declining levels of political support and changing patterns of political participation. Against this backdrop, a growing number of governments claim that democratic innovations could reconnect institutions with citizens and promote increased cooperation with the system, which ultimately could result in greater levels of political trust (Wang & Wan Wart, 2007; Carman, 2010; Johnson, 2014). Yet, it remains unclear if democratic innovations really can generate trust in political institutions. Even if both trust and new forms of participation has become fashionable fields of social science research, research on the impact of participation on political trust is scarce (Gabriel, 2017).

We will analyze the impact of democratic innovations in light of two theories of political trust, which are often used to explain its decline. One is politics centred and concentrates on the political performance of governance. Political trust is here seen as politically endogenous and is considered a key influence on social trust. The other is society centred and focuses on civil society and social capital. Trust in political institutions is thought to originate outside the political sphere, in civil society, and political trust is seen as an extension of social trust.

Even though many scholars encourage us to view these theories as mutually dependent, they are often treated independently (Newton, 2006; Newton, Stolle & Zmerli, 2017). Also, society centred studies primarily analyze participation in civic groups and associations (Putnam 1993) and politics centred studies primarily highlight how institutionally guaranteed rules of law or the universality of institutions in their explanations of the development of trust (Rothstein & Stolle, 2003). New forms of participation and the power-sharing aspects of institutions, which are defining features of democratic innovations, have received much less attention (Freitag & Buhlmann, 2009).

The characteristics of democratic innovations make them interesting in relation to politics centred as well as society centred theories, since they can create incentives for individuals to behave in ways that increase social capital (i.e. through socializing effects on democratic and cooperative values and norms), just as they may affect how citizens evaluate government performance.

The umbrella term ‘democratic innovations’ encompasses a range of new mechanisms aimed at expanding citizens’ participation in political decision-making (Smith, 2009; Newton & Geissel, 2012). These include town hall meetings, deliberative polls, participatory budgeting, e-petitioning and issue forums. A common denominator is that they all represent attempts by governmental organisations to promote the participation of citizens in policies. They are government driven (top-down) rather than citizen initiated (bottom-up), and embedded within institutions. This suggests that citizens will utilise their judgement of these innovations to make broader inferences about the political system (Carman, 2010). The participants’ interactions may serve as cues from which they can update previously held beliefs about the trustworthiness of government (Åström, Jonsson & Karlsson, 2017; Christensen 2016).

Aside from analysing if democratic innovation affect social and political trust, the relationship between perceived changes in political and social trust is interesting. A large number of studies have demonstrated a correlation between political and social trust at both aggregate country level and the individual level across different context and populations (Söderskov & Dinesen, 2016). Accordingly, democratic government may in general help to generate social capital, social capital may generally help to improve the performance of government, which often tend to affect political support. However, as Newton shows (2006), changes in social trust does not necessarily correspond with changes in political trust.

Online crowdsourcing processes, such as the Estonian Citizens’ Assembly studied here, marks one form of democratic innovation that strongly enables and promotes collaboration between participating citizens. Through online discussions and knowledge exchange, participating citizens not only proposes legislative changes but also discusses and shape legislative proposals jointly (Brabham, 2008). However, the contact and collaboration between participating citizens and policy makers is limited in this form of democratic innovation. Hence, while positive effects on social trust may weel be expected, there are reasons to be doubtful about potential positive effects on political trust.

In this article, we will thus examine the following research questions:

What are the perceived effect of participation in a democratic innovation on social trust?

What are the perceived effect of participation in a democratic innovation on political trust?

What is the relationship between perceived changes in social and political trust among participants in a democratic innovation?

Attempts to explain changing attitudes face several difficulties. One is that cross-national surveys usually lack the contextual detail for explaining change. Another is that only a small minority of the citizens ever get in contact with democratic innovations. This study will therefore use a case study design. The case, “The Estonian Citizens’ Assembly”, is extreme in terms of the rapid decline in political support preceding it and the bold democratic innovation that followed. So even though great caution must be exercised in drawing further conclusions, the design increase the likelihood of revealing interesting cause and effect relationships.

The Estonian Citizens’ Assembly was initiated in late 2012 as a direct consequence of a legitimacy crisis of Estonian political parties and representative institutions. The spark igniting the crisis was the unravelling of a scheme of illegal party financing. The growing anti-political sentiments and antagonism that followed culminated in the so-called Charter 12, demanding constitutional changes and an expansion of participatory institutions in Estonian politics. The response from governmental institutions, in collaboration with the civil society, took the form of public crowdsourcing and deliberative mini-publics; a process that ended up in changing several laws in Estonia. The process was analyzed by way of as a broad survey among the participants in the crowdsourcing process (n=847).

The article will proceed as follow. Next we review key elements in theoretical accounts of the complex relationship between democratic innovation, political trust and social trust. This is followed by the empirical analysis, presented in two sub-sections. (1) Are democratic innovations helpful in generating social and political trust? (2) How does the relationship between social and political trust look like? The final section discusses the implications of our results.

## **Political participation and social trust**

Social trust, i.e. the propensity of individuals to trust others in general, have proven to be one of the most important indicators of the strength and quality of societies and communities across the world (Fukuyama, 1995). The average level of social trust across countries predict strongly both economic and social measures of societal progress from national economic growth to life satisfaction.

An extensive academic literature has focused on the connection between political participation and social trust. Primarily this relationship has been viewed as intangibly interlinked, seeing social trust and political participation as mutually reinforcing in a “virtuous

circle” (Putnam, 1993: 180). Various forms of civic engagement and political participation is thought to function as schools of democracy, teaching participants democratic habits and values that foster social trust (Pateman, 1969; Barber, 1984). Further, joint engagement in political activities among citizens may help forming new alliances and relationships that helps increase the participants trust in others (Putnam, 1993). However, social trust is also thought of as a prerequisite for political participation as trust in the intentions, competencies and good will of others is deemed necessary for citizens to invest time, effort and resources in joint political activities (Crepaz, Jazayeri and Polk, 2017). Further, mutual trust between collaborating parties is seen as a recourse that decreases coordination costs of joint political endeavours and levitates problems of collective action (Fukuyama, 1995).

Despite the dominating narrative of theorizing the relationship between social trust and political participation as circular and mutually reinforcing, empirical studies of this relationship has predominantly focused on evaluating the casual effects of social trust on political participation (see Crepaz, Jazayeri and Polk, 2017 for an overview). In this study, we take the opposing and less extensively researched perspective, investigating the potential effects on social trust of citizens’ engagement in joint political participation. We set out to study the hypothesis that participating in political activities together with others may bolster citizens’ tendency to trust others.

There are reasons to be sceptical of this hypothesis. Some scholars argue that social trust on the individual level essentially is a stable or even fixed outlook that is deeply rooted in the person’s morality and consequently does not respond to single (or even sustained) political activities (Becker 1996; Couch and Jones 1997; Uslaner, 2002). Others have argued that political activities can help bond trust within likeminded communities but is unlikely to change individuals generalized trust, i.e. trust in most people (cf. Newton, 1999; Offe, 1999). Consequently, any observed associations between specific social experiences (such as engaging in specific political activities) and changes in social trust should according to this view be interpreted as spurious rather than meaningful (Glanville, Andersson & Paxton, 2013: 3).

At the heart of this criticism lies a conception of social trust, or our propensity to trust others in general, as an essentially moral value and as a psychological predisposition, either innate or learned early in life. Any substantial changes in social trust through the life span is triggered by aggregate level changes related to systemic or societal developments (e.g. economic conditions at the national level) (Uslaner, 2002). Our day to day social encounters, or our experiences of being helped or cheated by others do little to change our disposition to trust or not.

In contrast to this view of social trust as a deeply rooted psychological disposition and stable moral quality, many studies have found indications that individuals develop their propensity to trust through interactions and experiences. Paxton and Glanville (2007) found across two large survey studies that localized trust experiences in adulthood effected individuals' propensity to trust others in general. In a separate, experimental study, Paxton and Glanville found that individuals "reformulated their positions on trust after encountering experiences inconsistent with their prior expectations by dynamically summing and generalizing from interactions" (2013: 201). The authors found stronger positive effects on social trust among individuals with low trust predispositions. Eek and Rothstein (2005) conducted an experiment, showing that witnesses to a situation where a person bribed an authority to gain advantageous treatment had negative effects not only on their trust for the authority but also for people in general (social trust). Other studies have found positive effects on social trust from interaction in diverse neighborhoods (Marschall & Stolle, 2004), membership in diverse voluntary associations (Stolle, 1998), as well as from informal social ties (Glanville, Andersson & Paxton, 2013) and supportive interactions with neighbors (Li, Pickles & Svage, 2005). Further, extensive psychological research has identified effects of situational factors on interpersonal trust indicating that although our general propensity to trust other may tend to be stable, our actual realization of this propensity to trust is highly determined by factors that vary over time (see Thielmann & Hibling, 2015 for an overview).

All in all, extensive empirical evidence across both experimental and survey based research indicate that social trust is malleable rather than stable and experience based rather than innate or developed early in life. However, the strong indications that social trust is shaped by experiences does in no way deduce that political participation strengthens social trust. Although the empirical basis for the potential effects of political participation on social trust is scarce, there are notable studies identifying positive effects of political participation on social trust.

Kaase (1999) find evidence of positive associations between participation in political organizations on interpersonal trust among citizens across nine European countries at three time points. Although the reverse causal direction (greater trust leading to higher participation) cannot be completely ruled out, the author argues that results "seems to buffer the role of organizational underpinnings for the emergence of interpersonal trust" (Kaase, 1999: 19). However, organizational participation is a long-term form of political engagement highly dissimilar from the form of political participation investigated in this study. Hence, the question remains if short term engagement in a democratic innovation of the type studied here can have equivalent effects.

Grönlund, Setälä & Herne (2010) found in, an experimental setting, small but positive effects on social trust from two different forms of political participation, deliberation and voting. Finnish citizens were recruited to a one day participatory experiment around the issue of nuclear power. Participants were randomly assigned to two different treatment, one half participated in moderated small group deliberative discussions with instructions to formulate joint consensual statements while the other group based decisions on a secret ballot. The study showed small positive effects on social trust from both forms of participation, consistent also at a follow up survey after six months.

The study by Grönlund and colleagues shows us that even short-term experiences of political participation may have lasting effects on social trust. Based on these results we hypothesize that:

*H1: Engagement in the Estonian Citizens Assembly leads to increased social trust among participants.*

Despite, the indications from past research that short-term engagement can have lasting effects on social trust we also hypothesize that the level of engagement will moderate the effect on trust:

*H2: The level of activity in the engagement within the Estonian Citizens Assembly will moderate positive effects on social trust from participation.*

Based on Paxton and Glanville's (2013) experiments indicating that positive trust experiences have more profound effects on individuals with low trust predispositions (low initial social trust), leads us to hypothesize that the effects on social trust from participating in the ECA will be greatest among participants with negative initial dispositions. However, lacking an ex ante measurement of social trust, we use respondents level of satisfaction with the way democracy works as a proxy for initial level of social trust. The two measures have proven to be strongly correlated, and previous studies have argued for the use of satisfaction with democracy as a proxy for trust (Åström, Jonsson & Karlsson, 2017). Based on this we hypothesize that:

*H3: Participants that are dissatisfied with the way democracy functions in Estonia experience a stronger increased social trust from participation in the ECA.*

An extensive literature has shown a connection between procedural fairness, i.e. the experience of for instance political participation or interactions with governmental institutions as fair and free from corruption or bias as an important prerequisite for trust. The study, cited above, by Eek and Rothstein (2005) shows one example of how evidence of unfair or corrupt treatment can lead to decreasing social trust. Similarly, studies of deliberative forms of political participation have indicated that the perceived fairness of decision-making rules in group decision making strongly influences the level of trust among group members (cf. Hassing Nielsen, 2015). Based on the results of these studies we hypothesize that:

*H4: Participants that perceive the process of participating in the ECA as fair experience a stronger increased social trust from their participation.*

## **Political trust and participation**

Participatory processes initiated by government yet separate from the forms of citizen participation inherent to democratic governance, so called ‘democratic innovations’ (Smith, 2009; Newton & Geissel, 2012), presents a potential avenue for influencing citizens trust in governmental and political institutions. Citizens might utilise their judgement of these innovations to make broader inferences about the political system. Their interactions could serve as cues, as Carman (2010) puts it, from which they can update previously held beliefs about the trustworthiness of government. However, empirical research about the actual impact of participation on political trust is scarce, particularly when it comes to democratic innovations (Michels, 2011).

*H5. Engagement in the Estonian Citizens Assembly leads to increased political trust among participants.*

*H6: The level of activity in the engagement within the Estonian Citizens Assembly will moderate positive effects on political trust from participation.*

Previous work is mostly limited to qualitative case studies which focus on outcomes other than trust: such as how a particular mechanism may or may not either affect the outcomes of individual policymaking episodes or fulfil criteria of inclusive participation and true deliberation (Author & College, 2012). Only recently has it been acknowledged that the field

should pay more attention to relationships with the larger flows of political communication in society (Coleman & Shane, 2012), as well as to political systems (Warren, 2012; Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012).

In the wider literature on citizen engagement, evidence suggests that process satisfaction is key (Johnson, 2014). If experiences with participation are generally good, citizens tend to trust the government; conversely, process dissatisfaction might foster negative views on how democracy and its policies function in practice (Kumlin, 2002). The argument that participation leads to trust thus seems to assume that public participation is brought about effectively (Wang & Wan Wart, 2007) – and this is affirmed by a great deal of empirical research on the relationship between public services and trust. People satisfied with treatment received from public health, employment, and social services have a higher degree of trust in public institutions than those who feel unsatisfied (Christensen & Laegreid, 2005).

*H7: Participants that perceive the process of participating in the ECA as fair experience a stronger increased political trust from their participation.*

While the general argument on the importance of process is reasonable, citizens' predispositions may very well mediate how trust is affected by participation. For some people, new opportunities for participation in policymaking represent an important criterion of their trust in government; but for others, this might be negligible compared with electoral processes or the functioning of other public services. Positive acts by the government are, moreover, probably hard to see for some, but taken for granted by others (Bouckaert & Van de Walle, 2003; Van Ryzin, 2007). In other words, various predispositions – ideal, stealth, critical and disenchanted – may not only affect who participates, but also the participants' process evaluations and the degree to which their participation have an effect on trust.

As for now, however, we do not know whether citizens report a positive perception of government because they perceive that participatory processes work properly; or if they evaluate participatory processes positively because their image of government in general is positive. Most research on the issue either asks whether people engaged in some sort of participation have more or less trust than those without such experience, or associates higher levels of satisfaction with higher level of trust, without somehow controlling for generalised attitudes. As a consequence, as Van de Walle and Bouckhart (2003), and Kampen et al. (2006)

argue, the assumed causal relation between procedural satisfaction and trust could very well be reversed or bi-directional.

The assumption is that satisfaction with process leads to trust - but it could be that more supportive attitudes lead to better perception of processes and have a mediating effect on trust. Solving the complexities of causality is not easily done when using cross-sectional survey data. However, by including a novel dependent variable for measuring ‘modifications in trust due to the experience of participating in the e-petitioning system’ (described further in the methods section below), citizens’ predispositions and process evaluations could reasonably be imagined to cause potential modifications in trust. These modifications could either reinforce pre-established patterns of government support, or change them.

As perception, at least to some degree, is supposed to be generalised, satisfied citizens are expected to show more positive evaluations and trust modifications than dissatisfied citizens. In other words, we expect more reinforcement than change.

*H8: Participants that are satisfied with the way democracy functions in Estonia experience a stronger increased political trust from participation in the ECA.*

## **How are changes in social and political trust related?**

According to the society centred perspective generalized social trust is an important and central element in a complex and virtuous circle of social attitudes, behavior and institutions that act as the foundation for stable and effective democratic government. Social trust helps political institutions work because it “spills over”, as Putnam describes it, into cooperation with people in civic associations and then “spills up” to institutions necessary of representative government. However, the claim that the socially trusting individuals are also politically trusting has gained shifting empirical support. A good deal of individual-level survey research suggests that social and political trust are rather weakly correlated, if at all. Another body of work finds an association between social and political trust. But even when there is a link between the two, the direction of this relationship has been brought into question. According to the politics centred perspective it is positive experiences with representatives of “good institutions” that spill over to trust in institutions, which then provides the basis for social trust.

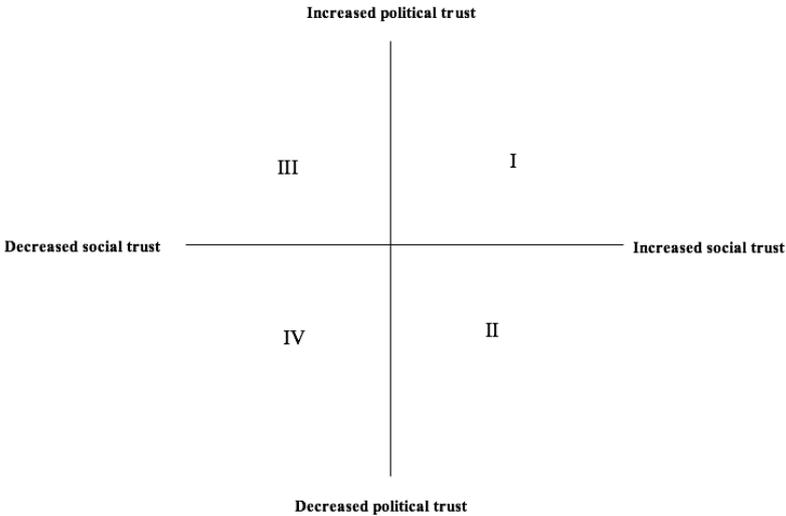
Important policy implications follow from each of these perspectives. As Rothstein and Stolle (2008) argue:

*If the society-centered model is correct, government can claim that the main problems that plague their societies are caused by too little volunteering. To make democracy work and the economy grow, citizens have to get involved. However, if the theory presented here is correct, governments can not blame their citizens for the lack of social capital. Instead, the policy message becomes a very different one: that the lack of social capital is caused by dysfunctional government institutions (Rothstein & Stolle, 2008:457).*

Many scholars encourage us to view these theories as mutually dependent, but they are nevertheless often treated independently in separate literatures (Newton, 2006; Newton, Stolle & Zmerli, 2017). Society centred studies primarily analyze participation in civic groups and associations (Putnam 1993) and politics centred studies primarily highlight how institutionally guaranteed rules of law or the universality of institutions in their explanations of the development of trust (Rothstein & Stolle, 2003). New forms of participation and the power-sharing aspects of institutions, which are defining features of democratic innovations, have received much less attention (Freitag & Buhlmann, 2009). However, democratic innovations have the potential to draw these literatures closer together.

How are changes in political trust associated with changes in social trust in the case of Estonian citizen assembly? In answering this question, we will use an analytic framework that allows for empirical variation, by aligning social and political trust as orthogonal dimensions. Although the commonality of various combinations of these dimensions remains to be seen empirically, for theoretical purposes, they are orthogonal to one another: a citizen may change their social and political trust in any direction, both of which are distinct. In principle, changes in social trust can accompany either increased or decreased political trust. We can, therefore, set them out to form a two-dimensional political trust space.

**Figure 1.** *The trust space*

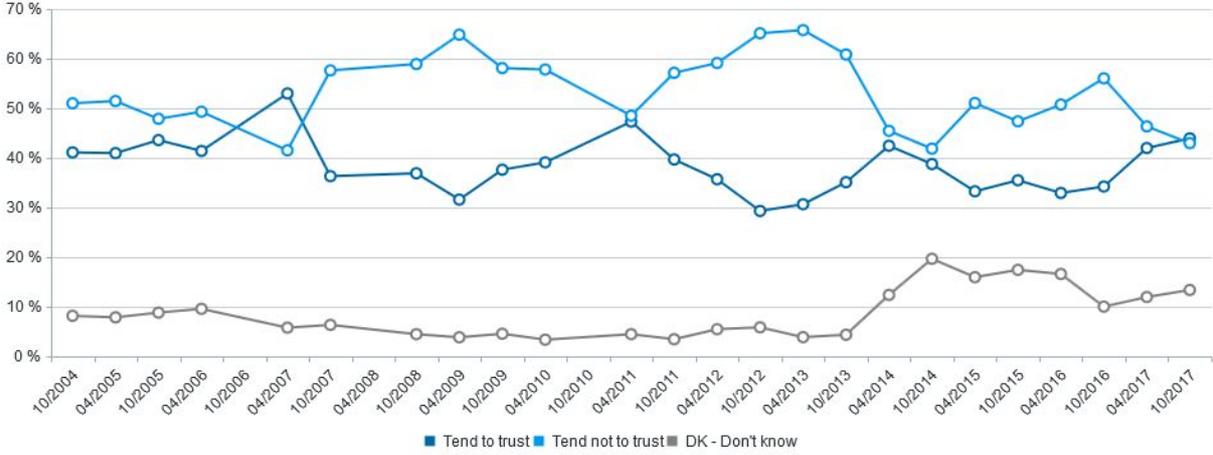


**Case description: The Estonian Citizens’ Assembly Process (ECA)**

In the wake of a political scandal in 2012, involving a scheme of illegal party financing, the latent distrust towards the political system in Estonia developed into a legitimacy crisis. The crisis was characterized by a wide spread anti-political sentiments, antagonism and massive protests. The crisis culminated when a group of intellectuals formulated a pamphlet called Harta 12 (Charter 12) that metamorphosed into an online petition that gathered more than 18,000 signatures within a week, which caused protests on the streets across the country. The pressure from the public forced the Estonian political actors to take action. One such action was that the Estonian government chose to dismiss the Minister of Justice, as he was accused to be a part of the illegal financing scheme. Apart from the dismissal of the Minister of Justice, the political parties did not engage with citizens or the civil society to resolve the crisis.

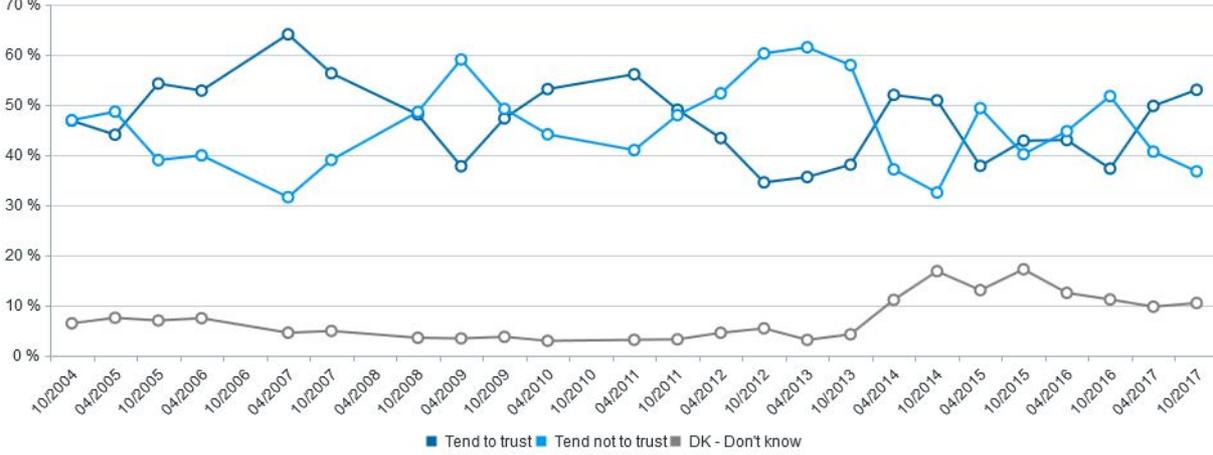
To get a grasp of the impact this crisis had on the Estonian society, Graph 1 and Graph 2 below is of interest to study. While trust in the Parliament has been low in periods prior to this scandal, as Table 1 shows, the two data points (10/2012 and 04/2013) reveals the deepest and long-lasting dip in trust in the Parliament Estonia since the European Commission started to measure it. The same goes with trust in Government that, as we can see in Table 2, hits the bottom low during this crisis.

**Graph 1. Estonian Citizens' Trust in Parliament, 2004-2017**



Source: European Commission, URL: <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Chart/getChart/chartType/lineChart//themeKy/18/groupKy/89/savFile/201>

**Graph 2. Estonian Citizens' Trust in Government, 2004-2017**



Source: European Commission, URL: <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Chart/getChart/chartType/lineChart//themeKy/18/groupKy/98/savFile/663>

While the political establishment in the Parliament and the Government did not engage with citizens nor the civil society in the crisis, the President Toomas Hendrik Ilves stepped in and engaged in dialogue. The President holds a rather ‘neutral’ political position in Estonia, and while citizens’ place little trust in political parties, the Parliament, and the Government they put rather great trust in the Estonian presidency. The president is often seen as a mediator between the citizens and the politicians, being seen as an impartial actor in political controversies.

A first action taken by the President was to announce a meeting to which he invited representatives from civil society organisations, a group of social scientists and lawyers, and the signers of Charter 12. The meeting that the President arranged was referred to as the Jääkelder meeting (literally ‘ice cellar’ in Estonian, and hereafter referred to as ‘the Ice-Cellar Meeting’), was streamed live online for all citizens to watch and listen to.

At the ‘Ice-Cellar Meeting’, a decision was taken to proceed with two innovative participatory mechanisms that aimed to increase the citizens’ dialogue and create new policy proposals. The first mechanism was (1) an online crowdsourcing process to collect policy proposals from citizens, and the second mechanism (2) a ‘deliberation day’ during which a random sample of citizens from the entire country was invited to participate in shaping the proposals into policy proposals to be handled by the parliament.

These events, starting with the online petition and the street protests, through the ‘Ice-Cellar Meeting’ and the introduced participatory mechanisms developed organically. In prior research, the process has been analysed as a whole and then referred to as the ‘Estonian Citizens’ Assembly Process’ (Jonsson, 2015). This study will, however, focus specifically on the crowdsourcing of the citizens’ proposals.

The crowdsourcing process started after the Ice-Cellar Meeting when the Estonian Cooperation Assembly<sup>1</sup>, together with a number of civil society actors created the website for collecting the proposals. As the crowdsourcing was aimed to provide the upcoming ‘Deliberation day’ with policy proposals, the web page was formulated around the five chosen topics that to some extent dealt with policy issues connected to party financing and the role of political parties in Estonia. Among the requirements for citizens to be able to post material on the website was for them to log in with an electronic ID, thus making the identity of contributors known, and their suggestions publicly accessible. As the process ended, a total of

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<sup>1</sup> The Estonian Cooperation Assembly is a network of organizations and political parties created by the former President and formally tied to the Office of the President. After reorganization in 2006, the Assembly is more independent, funded by the public, employs staff, conducts its own research and functions as a form of think tank

2,000 original proposals and 4,000 comments on those had been posted on the website (Jonsson, 2015).

## **Methods and measurements**

### **Survey**

The analyses presented in this paper draws on a survey among participants in the ECA (n=847). A survey was sent out to all 2042 Estonians who had participated in the crowdsourcing process of the ECA. The response rate was decent at 41,5%. The survey included questions about the ECA process, as well as questions about experiences of political participation, trust in political institutions and satisfaction with democracy as well as a number of socio- demographic background questions.

The survey was conducted by the Estonian NGO Praxis. The authors supplied survey questions and conducted the statistical analysis.

### **Measurements**

Table 1 presents the operationalisations and measurements of each concept. It also shows information concerning variable construction, scaling, and reliability measures (Cronbach's alpha) for index variables, all of which reached an acceptable degree of reliability (>.7) except for the index for social trust that scored just below 7 ( $\alpha$ : .693).

**Table 1. Operationalisations and measurements**

Concept	Operationalization	Variable	Scale
<b>Trust</b>			
(Change in) Social trust	Assesses how participants perceived their change in trust in other citizens and the civil society following their participation in the ECA process	Index variable based on two items, measuring change in trust in other citizens and the civil society, each on a scale from -3 to 3, in which 0 indicates stability.	-6 to 6 $\alpha$ : .693
(Change in)political trust	Assesses how participants perceived their change in trust in the parliament, political parties, government and the president following their participation in the ECA process	Index variable based on four items, measuring change in trust in political parties, the parliament, the government and the president, each on a scale from -3 to 3, in which 0 indicates stability.	-12 to 12 $\alpha$ : .887
<b>Political Factors</b>			
Satisfaction with democracy	Assesses how participants perceived their satisfaction with how Estonian democracy functions	Answer to the survey question, “Overall, how satisfied are you with the way Estonian democracy functions today?”	1 = Not at all satisfied 4 = Very satisfied
Political engagement	Measures the respondents acts of political participation that during the last 12 months	Index based on 12 items measuring participants’ activity in the following forms of participation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contacted a politician (0–1)</li> <li>• Contacted an organisation (0–1)</li> <li>• Contacted a public servant (0–1)</li> <li>• Worked for a political party (0–1)</li> <li>• Participated in a protest campaign online (0–1)</li> <li>• Worked for an interest organisation (0–1)</li> <li>• Wore a campaign button (0–1)</li> <li>• Signed a petition (0-1)</li> <li>• Participated in a demonstration (0–1)</li> </ul>	0 to 12 $\alpha$ : .715

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participated in a labour strike (0–1)</li> <li>• Participated in a boycott (0–1)</li> <li>• Contributed economically to a political cause (0–1)</li> </ul>	
Ideological self-positioning	Measures participants' self-perceived ideological orientation on a left–right spectrum	“Politics is often discussed in relation to a left–right spectrum. Where would you place yourself on this scale?” 1 = Left-most, 10 = Right-most	1-10

**Table 1 (cont.)** *Operationalisations and measurements*

Concept	Operationalisation	Variable	Scale
<b>Socio-demographic Characteristics</b>			
Age	Indicates participants' age (in years)	Number of years	19 to 91
Gender	Indicates participants' gender	0 = Man; 1 = Woman	0 to 1
Post-secondary education	Identifies participants with either an academic or vocational post-secondary education	0 = No post-secondary education 1 = Post-secondary education	0 to 1
<b>Procedural satisfaction</b>			
Satisfaction with implemented	Measures participants' degree of satisfaction with the implementation of the Rahvakogu process	Additive index based on participants' satisfaction with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information disseminated to the public (0–4)</li> <li>• Information disseminated to participants (0–4)</li> <li>• Ease of use/availability (0–4)</li> <li>• Possibility for discussion (0–4)</li> <li>• How the recommendations were synthesised (0–4)</li> <li>• The quality of the final recommendations (0-4)</li> <li>• The implementation of the recommendations by the parliament (0-4)</li> </ul>	0 to 28  $\alpha: .824$

Perceived influence of the innovation	Measures participants' perceptions of the functionality of the democratic innovation in the wider realm of local democracy	Additive index based on perceptions about how e-petitions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give citizens more influence over the political agenda (0–4)</li> <li>• Contribute to better decisions and efficiency in the government (0–4)</li> </ul>	0 to 8 $\alpha$ : .825
Activity in innovation	Measures participants' degree of activity in innovation	Additive index based on activity in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reading petitions (0–4)</li> <li>• Discussing petitions (0–4)</li> <li>• Creating petitions (0–4)</li> </ul>	0 to 12 $\alpha$ : .743

**Analysis**

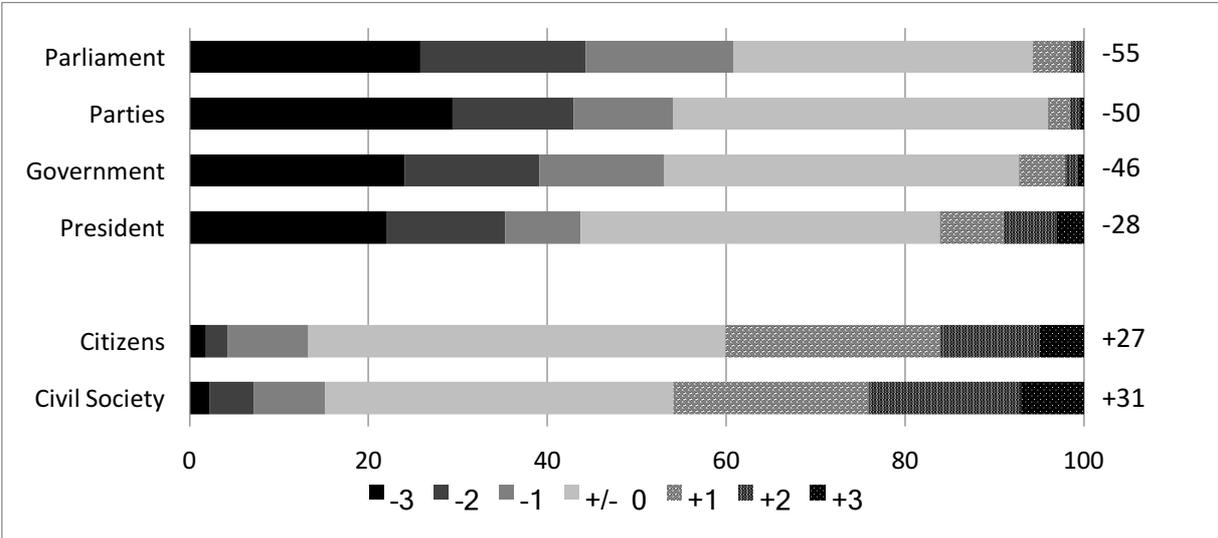
**Changes in political and social trust: Descriptive analyses**

From evaluating mere descriptive analyses it becomes evident that participation in the ECA influenced both political as well as social trust and that the effects go in a positive as well as negative direction. While the trust levels of about 40% of the participants remain unchanged in relation to participation in the ECA, a majority of the participants experience a positive or negative change in their trust for different political institutions, other citizens as well as civil society. Regarding political trust, or trust for political institutions, the changes are predominantly negative (See figure 1, below). Hence at the outset we can confirm that the ECA was not an effective way of reinstating political trust among participants. Over 60% of the participants experience a negative change in trust for the Estonian national parliament. For over 50% of the participants the trust in Estonian parties and the national government decreases in relation to their participation in the ECA. Lastly more than 40% of the participants experience decreasing trust for the president.

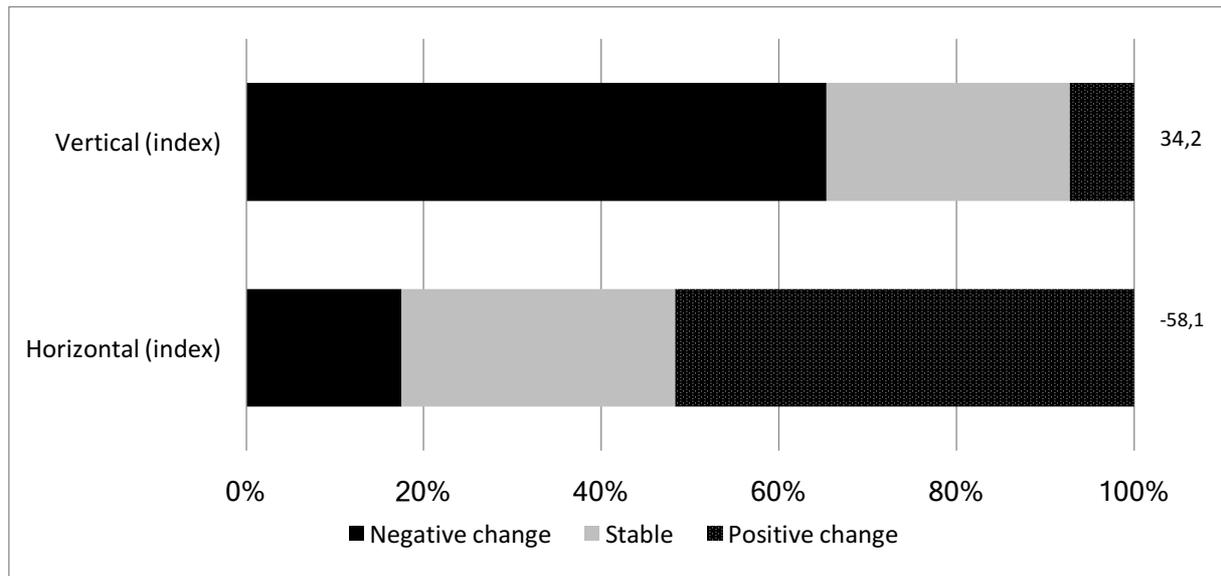
Positive changes in trust for these institutions are rarer. Yet, 16% of the participants have increased their level of trust for the president while less than 10% increased their trust for the government, parties and parliament. When aggregating the changes in trust for political institutions into an index (see figure 2, below) we find that 65% of the participants' decreased their level of political trust, while almost a third (27,3%) remain at the same level of political trust as before the ECA and merely 7% of the participants increased their level of trust.

For social trust or trust for other citizens and the Estonian civil society, the effects of the ECA seem more positive. 46% of the participants experienced an increase in trust for civil society organizations and 40% increased trust for other citizens. Decreasing levels of social trust are more rare, 15% of the participants walk away from the ECA with less trust for the Estonian civil society and 13% with lower levels of trust for other citizens. On an aggregated level (see figure 2, below) we find that a majority of the participants (51,7%) have increased their level of social trust, while roughly a third of the participants (30,8%) have remained unchanged and only 17,5% of the participants have decreased their levels of social trust.

**Figure 1.** Changes in trust: shares of participants and balance measurements.



**Figure 1.** Changes in vertical and social trust: shares of participants and balance measurements.



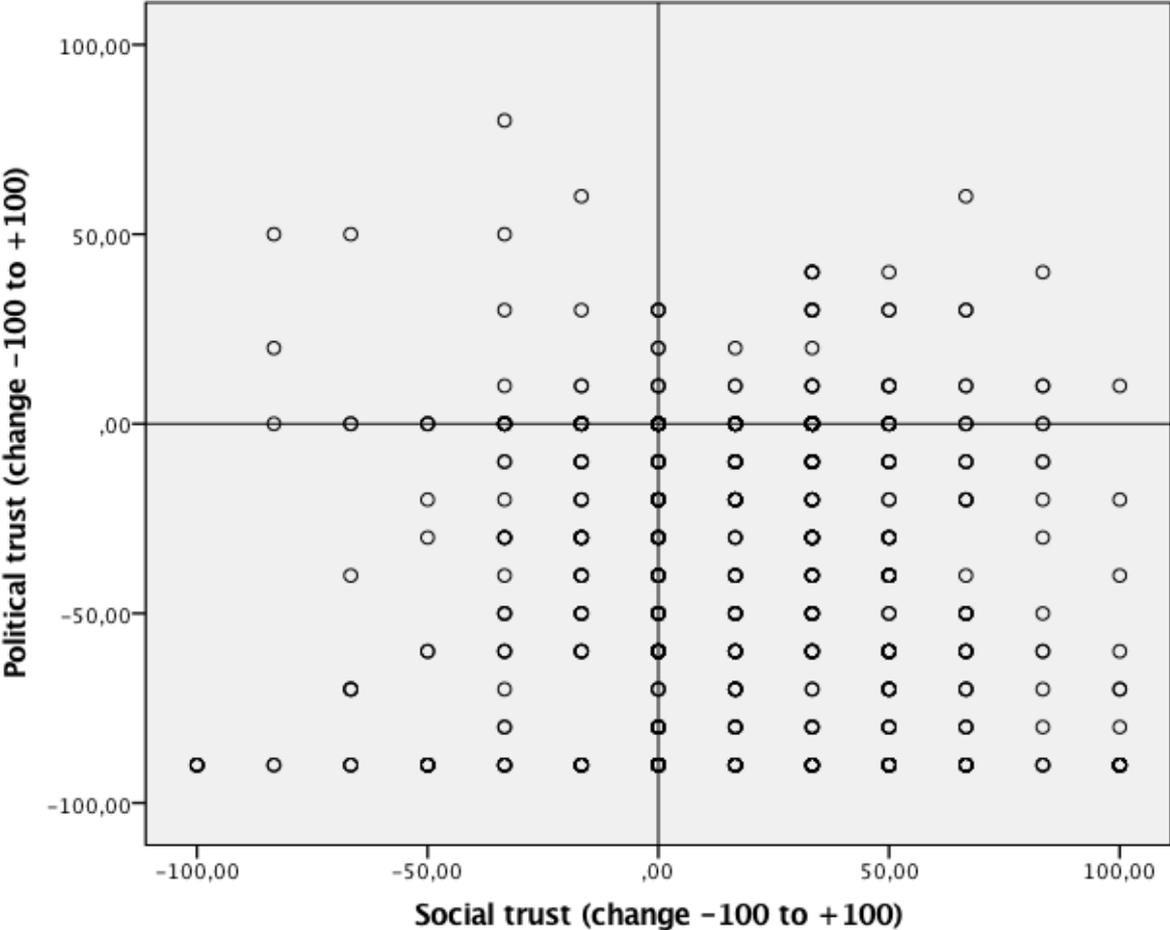
While the overall pattern of changes in vertical and social trust are clear, the question of understanding the underlying variation remains unanswered. In the following to sections we will turn to explanatory analyses of this variation, first concerning changes in political trust and thereafter social trust.

### The relationship between social and political trust

**Table 2.** Changes in political and social trust.

		<b>Social trust</b>		
		<i>Decreased</i>	<i>Stable</i>	<i>Increased</i>
<b>Political trust</b>	<i>Increased</i>	1,6% (n=11)	1,1% (n=8)	4,6% (n=32)
	<i>Stable</i>	3,9% (n=27)	13,5% (n=94)	10,2% (n=71)
	<i>Decreased</i>	12% (n=84)	16,3% (n=114)	36,8% (n=257)

Graph 3. Percived changes across the trust space.



## **Explaining changes in political trust**

The multinomial regression models investigate the effects of the independent variables on the likelihood (odds ratio, OR) of a participant having a positive or negative change in trust for political institutions. The analyses are conducted through pair wise comparisons between the participants whose trust in institutions has remained unchanged throughout the process (the reference category) and participants that have had a positive respectively a negative change in trust. The coefficients are to be interpreted as the effect of (one positive step on) the independent variable on the likelihood of having a positive respectively a negative change in trust. For instance the effect of satisfaction with democracy on positive changes in trust (OR: 4.963,  $p < .001$ ) indicates with a 99,9% statistical significance that participants who are more satisfied with the Estonian democracy in general are almost five times as likely as less satisfied participants to experience a positive change in trust for institutions. An odds ratio of 1 indicates a null relationship, meaning that the likelihood of belonging to the reference category (constant) and the investigated category (negative change or positive change) is equal (1) regardless of the value on the independent variable. All coefficients below 1 indicate negative relationships. For instance the effect of satisfaction with democracy on negative changes in trust (OR: .199,  $p < .001$ ) indicates that participants who are more satisfied with democracy are five times less likely than other participants to experience a negative change in trust.

The above discussed effects of satisfaction with democracy are clearly among the strongest effects evident in the analyses. Being satisfied with the way democracy works in Estonia is clearly both a protective factor against losing trust in institutions from participating the Citizens Assembly as well as a factor that strongly boosts the likelihood of increasing levels of trust. One can hence argue that if we view the Citizens Assembly as a process aimed at increasing trust for institutions, this is foremost successful among the already satisfied citizens. The process is thus to some extent preaching to the choir.

The analyses does not produce any other significant effects on positive changes in trust, but a number of factors seems to influence the likelihood of experiencing a decrease in trust for institutions. First, satisfaction with the implementation of the ECA functions as a weak protective factor against decreasing trust in institutions (OR: .951,  $p < .1$ ). The negative effect of satisfaction is only statistically significant at a 90% level and translates into less than a five percent decrease in likelihood for decreasing trust for each step on the index variable for satisfaction with the implementation (see table 2 for a description of this index). No corresponding effect was found of satisfaction with the outcome of the process, i.e. effects on

citizens agenda setting powers, and the quality of policy-making. Hence, the little effects found of procedural satisfaction relates exclusively to negative changes in trust and are fairly weak.

In this case, the trust for institutions was clearly not strongly related to the actual procedure of the Citizens’ Assembly.

**Table 3.** *Multinomial logistic regression models explaining changes in political trust.*

Note: The table displays odds ratios, with standard errors in parentheses. Levels of statistical significance is displayed as follows: \*\*\*: p<.001, \*\*: p<.01, \*: p<.05, x: p<.1.

	Constant	Negative change	Positive change
<b>Procedural satisfaction</b>			
Activity (Index)	1	1.1 <sup>x</sup> (.055)	1.082 (.088)
Implementation (Index)	1	.951 <sup>*</sup> (.031)	1.030 (.051)
Functionality (Index)	1	1.064 (.056)	1.185 (.107)
<b>Political factors</b>			
Satisfaction with democracy	1	.199 <sup>**</sup> (.192)	4.963 <sup>**</sup> (.372)
Participation (Index)	1	1.053 (.063)	1.110 (.097)
Ideological orientation (Left-right)	1	1.004 (.052)	.959 (.080)
<b>Socio-demographic characteristics</b>			
Age	1	1.022 <sup>**</sup> (.007)	1.013 (.012)
Gender (woman)	1	.616 <sup>*</sup> (.250)	1.129 (.407)
Education (post-secondary)	1	5.499 <sup>*</sup> (.711)	.756 (1.136)
N	846		
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	.4		

The analyses also vindicate a weak positive effect of the level of activity in the Citizens’ Assembly on negative change in trust (OR: 1.1, p<.1). Hence more active participants were actually more prone to experience a lost in trust for political institutions than inactive participants. The most probable explanation for this result is that the level of activity in the Assembly was higher among participants that were dissatisfied with the institutions. This interpretation is supported by the fact that level of activity is negatively associated with the

level of satisfaction with the democracy of Estonia ( $r: -.94, p<.05$ ). Further we also find a very strong effect of education on negative changes in trust.

Participants with a high level of education were actually more than five times more likely than other participants to experience a lost in trust for political institutions (OR: 5.499,  $p<.05$ ). This strong effect of education is actually independent from the effect of predisposition to the democratic system (satisfaction with democracy) as analyses of the relationship between education and satisfaction fail to find any significant relationship. Highly educated participants were also not less satisfied with the procedure and implementation of the Rahvakogu process. Hence highly educated participants were not more critical towards the Estonian democracy nor towards the Rahvakogu, they were only much more likely to become critical, or at least less trusting, from participating in the Rahvakogu process. The effect of education is one sided, the opposite relationship, that participants with low education were to be more likely to gain trust in institutions were not supported by the analysis (OR: 1.136,  $p>.1$ ). This result is somewhat puzzling, as it does not support the common conclusion that highly educated citizens have higher levels of trust (c.f. Hooghe, Marien & de Vroome, 2012) and neither that they are more stable in their level of trust for political institutions. Instead we see a strongly decreasing level of trust in this group connected to political participation that cannot be explained by low satisfaction with the participatory process.

Lastly the analyses find a positive effect on the likelihood of decreasing trust related to the age of the participants (OR: 1.022,  $p<.01$ ). Older participants are more likely to experience a growing distrust in political institutions from participating in the Rahvakogu process. Neither in this case we find any corresponding relationship for positive changes in trust, i.e. that younger citizens are more likely to experience rising trust. All in all, the analyses find that a number of factors influence changes in trust related to participation in this democratic innovation. One of the main hypotheses of this paper is confirmed by the analyses as predisposition, meaning the participants' level of satisfaction with democracy successfully predicts both decreasing and increasing levels of trust. High satisfaction strongly increases the likelihood of experiencing a positive change in trust for institutions and strongly decreases the likelihood of negative changes. The second hypothesis, that participants' satisfaction with the participatory process should influence changes in trust is not supported.

## Explaining changes in social trust

Turning to participants social trust, identical explanatory models have been tested has on a dependent variable dividing citizens according to their experiences of changes in trust for other citizens and the Estonian civil society. Regarding negative changes in social trust only one significant effect was identified by the model. Satisfaction with the implementation of the ECA functions had a negative effect on negative changes in social trust (OR: .929,  $p < .05$ ). Alike in the analysis of political trust procedural satisfaction, to a limited extent, seems to function as a protective factor against loss of social trust.

Turning to positive changes in social trust we find some important differences in the building of vertical and social trust through citizen participation. In contrast to the analysis of changes in political trust, predisposition (i.e. citizens satisfaction with democracy) had a negative effect on positive changes in social trust (OR: .686,  $p < .05$ ). Hence the analyses indicate that participants who were satisfied with Estonian democracy were less likely to gain a stronger social trust from participating in the ECA. No corresponding effect was found for negative changes in social trust, indicating that high satisfaction did not increase the likelihood of losing trust for citizens and civil society. Further, we find in the model for social trust positive effects of procedural satisfaction which was not the case for political trust. Satisfaction with the implementation of the ECA (OR: 1.095,  $p < .01$ ) as well as satisfaction with its functionality in Estonian democracy (OR: 1.296,  $p < .001$ ) both had positive effects on increases in social trust. These results indicate that procedures of participatory processes are of importance for effects on participants trust for citizens and civil society.

Among the control factors we find two additional significant effects. First, the respondents experiences of political participation (outside of the ECA) increased the likelihood of growing social trust (OR: 1.165,  $p < .01$ ). Second, younger participants were more likely to experience an increased social trust as we found a negative effect of age on positive changes in trust (OR: .971,  $p < .001$ ). In sum hence older participants were both less likely to gain more trust in other citizens and civil society as well as more likely to lose trust in political institutions (see table 2, above).

One, non significant finding begs for analysis, and that is the lack of effects of education on changes in social trust. In the analysis of political trust we found a strong effect of education on decreasing trust, i.e. highly educated participants were much more likely to experience a

weakening trust for political institutions than other participants. No corresponding effects were found in the models explaining changes in social trust.

**Table 4.** *Multinomial logistic regression models explaining changes in social trust.*

	Constant	Negative change	Positive change
<b>Procedural satisfaction</b>			
Activity (Index)	1	1.062 (.064)	.987 (.050)
Implementation (Index)	1	.929 (.035)	1.095* (.028)
Functionality (Index)	1	.994 (.062)	1.296** (.053)
<b>Political factors</b>			
Satisfaction with democracy	1	1.252 (.194)	.686* (.154)
Participation (Index)	1	1.073 (.073)	1.165* (.057)
Ideological orientation (Left-right)	1	1.098 (.065)	.970 (.050)
<b>Socio-demographic characteristics</b>			
Age	1	1.011 (.009)	.971*** (.007)
Gender (woman)	1	1.407 (.299)	.965 (.243)
Education (post-secondary)	1	.506 (.701)	3.251 (.764)
N	581		
Nagelkerke (pseudo-R <sup>2</sup> )	.226		

Note: The table displays odds ratios, with standard errors in parentheses. Levels of statistical significance is displayed as follows: \*\*\*: p<.001, \*\*: p<.01, \*: p<.05, x: p<.

### Summary of the analyses

The descriptive analyses make it fully evident that participation in the ECA-process did not foster a growing trust in political institutions. On the contrary we see evidence of a general downturn in vertical trust among participants. As the dependent variable in these analyses is change in trust we cannot fully attribute this trend to a bias among the participants i.e. that critical citizens were more willing to participate. This was without any doubt the case (over 70% of the participants were relatively dissatisfied with Estonian democracy) but the

explanation for the downturn in vertical trust among participants following the ECA must be sought after elsewhere.

Can this downturn be understood as an effect of dissatisfaction with the participatory process? Neither this seems to be confirmed by the analyses, as participants losing vertical trust were not less satisfied with the implementation and functionality of the ECA than other participants. In fact, participants experiencing negative changes in vertical trust were actually more satisfied with the implementation of the ECA than other participants (see table 3).

One important clue to this mystery is supplied by the result related to level of education. Highly educated participants were many times more likely to lose trust in political institutions. With a large margin this is the strongest effect in the analysis indicating that this participatory process had largely varying effects among participants of diverging education levels. Highly educated participants, potentially more critical and demanding, were much more likely to lose trust in institutions.

The analysis of changes in horizontal trust generated more expected results. Participants that were more politically active, more satisfied with the implementation of- and the functionality of the ECA were more likely to gain horizontal trust. There is although one puzzling exception in satisfaction with democracy: participants that were satisfied with Estonian democracy were less likely to gain social trust. This result must be interpreted in relation to the patterns of the analyses of this study taken together.

Viewed altogether the explanatory analyses showed widely varying results for changes in vertical and horizontal trust. The results actually indicate something of a null sum relationship between vertical and horizontal trust as the same factors that explain positive changes in one form of trust show negative effects on the other form of trust. For instance, predisposition or satisfaction with democracy is a factor that is positively associated with a strengthening of vertical trust while negatively associate with a strengthening of horizontal trust. The same goes for age, while older participants are less likely to gain horizontal trust they are more likely than other participants to gain vertical trust. Hence participants that gained stronger institutional trust also seem to have loosed horizontal trust and vice versa. This suspicion is partially confirmed by a bivariate correlation between the two trust indexes showing a weak negative relationship ( $r: -.065, p < .1$ ). In extension these results can be interpreted as identifying a strong climate of contention between the Estonian civil sphere and the political institutions, which is consistent with the wide spread discontent with political institutions that marked the starting point for the ECA-process.

## Conclusion

Based on the results of these analyses, what can we learn about the relationship between online participation and trust? As this study suggests, there is a strong potential for the building of trust from participation in online crowdsourcing, however restricted to one dimension of the trust space outlined above. The widespread positive effects found in this study are isolated to the social trust dimension. A large share of the surveyed participants experienced increased trust in other citizens as well as in the Estonian civil society. However, the search for a panacea for political distrust must continue. Although this case presents a challenging test of the potential effects of online participation on political trust, the context of the ECA was a political scandal with clear negative effects on the political trust among Estonians, it also presents a ambitious attempt to include a dissatisfied citizenry in shaping the countries legislation. However, the results from this study makes clear that in this context the number of citizens experiencing increased trust for Estonian political institutions is negligible.

One possible interpretation of these results is related to the design of democratic innovation. Political trust refers to the extent to which political institutions and actors fulfill people's normative expectations. Political trust may thus be increased through the fact that representatives learn from and become more responsive towards citizens demands. Social trust, on the other hand, it may be argued that public discussions enhance the development of norms such as sincerity and consistency among the participants, which may increase interpersonal trust (Dryzek & List, 2003).

Another possible interpretation is that this democratic innovation have been used by citizens against formal politics creating what Max Weber (1968) described as "inner morality" of trust in those you know, as against the "outer morality" of distrust in outsiders (Mishler & Rose, 2001). Hence, this government initiated democratic innovation might have created a space for civic mobilization among dissatisfied citizens against its political institutions. While the ECA resulted in legislative proposals that were indeed implemented, its participants came away strenghted in their distrust of the Estonian political institutions yet with a stronger sense of trust in their fellow citizens and the countries civil society.

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