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Rally ‘round the flag effects are not for all: Trajectories of institutional trust among populist and non-populist voters

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ABSTRACT

Using the Consequences of COVID-19 (COCO) dataset (quota sample of the adult Italian population, surveyed seven times by email), we analysed the trend of trust in political (political parties, parliament and local administrations), *super partes* (president of the Republic, judiciary and police) and international (the European Union and the United Nations) institutions from June 2019 to October 2022. Three latent growth curve models showed that trust in political institutions increased between June 2019 and April 2020 and subsequently decreased below the pre-pandemic level. Trust in *super partes* institutions decreased slightly between June 2019 and April 2020, decreased from April 2020 to April 2022 and increased in the subsequent months. Trust in international institutions declined between June 2019 and April 2020 and then returned to pre-pandemic levels. Three piecewise decompositions showed different trends in trust for non-populist voters, populist voters and non-voters. Strengths, weaknesses and possible developments of the study are discussed.

1. Introduction

Since the 1960s, it has been known that exogenous shocks, such as wars and terrorist attacks, increase citizens’ trust in the U.S. president (Lane 1962; Mueller 1970). In these cases, the heightened uncertainty and sense of urgency to respond quickly and effectively to the crisis lead the public opinion to respond to the shock by setting aside its previous dissatisfactions, grievances, frustrations and fears and expressing a more optimistic view of the state of society, that includes a more positive evaluation of the incumbent political authorities (Norrande and Wilcox 1993; Parker 1995). In social-psychological terms, this metaphorical “rally ‘round the flag effect” (or more simply, ‘rally effect’) is due to the substitution of subordinate sources of political identification (e.g., ‘I am a Democrat’) for superordinate ones (e.g., ‘I am an American’) (Brewer and Brown 1998). The most emblematic case of the rally effect probably occurred after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, when President George W. Bush’s popularity rose spectacularly from 51% to 86% in a matter of days (Hetherington and Nelson 2003).

More recently, the literature has shown that rally effects are not limited to the U.S. context. Indeed, they have been found in many other countries around the world, including Spain (Dinesen and Jaeger 2013), Belgium (Kuehnhans et al. 2020), Japan (Kobayashi and Katagiri 2018) and South Korea (Hwang et al. 2018). In parliamentary democracies, exogenous shocks not only increase trust in governments, public institutions and leading government parties (Johansson et al. 2021), but also satisfaction with the functioning of democracy (Bol et al. 2021). They are so strong that they can even boost trust in overtly corrupt political leaders (Chang and Park

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2020).

Rally effects serve an important social function: they prompt citizens to respond quickly and efficiently to the crisis and help society to confront the threat as a single and cohesive unit (Chatagnier 2012). This social function was crucial in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, when governments combated the crisis with a series of measures that had a dramatic impact on people and society. Indeed, the success of demanding policy measures such as curfews, lockdowns and mandatory vaccinations depended on citizen compliance which in turn required a high level of trust in the institutions that implemented them (Caplanova et al. 2021; Han et al. 2023; Kudranać and Jan 2022).

More recently, using the Compensatory Control Mechanism (CCM: see Kay et al. 2011) as the main theoretical framework, Rocco et al. (2021a,b) have shown that rally effects also serve a relevant psychological function. According to CCM, striving for and maintaining the perception of being able to control one's world is one of the basic human motivations. When this perception is satisfied, it promotes physical and psychological well-being, because it shields people from the distressing idea that important outcomes in their lives are consequences of randomness and chance. Exogenous shocks that lead to a decline in direct subjective control over their lives force people to resort to secondary sources of control, which include political institutions. Consistent with this, Rocco and colleagues have shown that increases in institutional trust triggered by exogenous shocks promote psychological well-being, via the mediation of perceived control.

The few longitudinal studies available show that rally effects triggered by wars and terrorist attacks last for a few months. In an initial phase (usually from 2 to 8 months), the crisis is not politicized and citizens rally around the flag. After that, as the urgency of the social and psychological functions of the crisis diminishes, the effect wears off, the subordinate sources of political identification from before the shock begin again to organise the political argumentation of public opinion, the crisis normalises and society returns to normal party politics. At the end of this process, trust in institutions returns to pre-crisis levels (Johansson et al. 2021).

1.1. COVID-19 and rally effects

The COVID-19 pandemic was an extraordinary 'natural laboratory' for the study of public opinion (e.g. Jurado and Kuo 2023). The dramatic crisis it triggered shocked the world and affected every dimension of individual, relational and social life. Unlike it happens with the 'traditional' exogenous shocks triggered by wars and terrorist attacks, during the pandemic the world had to contend with an invisible and morally neutral enemy. The attack was not focused on a particular area of the world and people and governments faced a permanent and largely indeterminate threat, with no definite beginning or end.

It is far from surprising that in the long months and years following the onset of the outbreak, numerous public opinion studies were conducted on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although many of them are limited by the absence of a pre-pandemic wave, these studies consistently show that the outbreak triggered rally effects in almost all countries studied (e.g., Bol et al. 2021; Kudranać and Jan 2022; Wang and Cheng 2021), even where, as in Sweden, the pre-pandemic level of institutional trust was unusually high (Esaiasson et al. 2021). Interestingly, this increase in institutional trust was a net effect of the pandemic and not a mere consequence of lockdowns (Schraff, 2021). Because of the highly interconnected nature of the contemporary world, when COVID-19 arrived in Italy, the first European country to be affected by the virus, an increase in institutional trust was observed in other countries where the virus had not yet arrived, such as France, Germany, Poland and Spain (De Vries et al. 2021). This anticipatory response to a threat that had not yet arrived is a strong and convincing testimony to the importance of the social and psychological function that rally effects serve.

Some studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic helped develop new knowledge on the processes leading to rally effects, showing interesting differences between people's reactions to the crisis. At the societal level, the gravity of the pandemic (Rump and Zwiener-Collins, 2021) and the centralization of its management (Lago et al., 2023) fostered institutional trust. At the individual level, consistent with the idea that exogenous shocks push people to develop a compensatory control over their lives, trust was fostered by subjective vulnerability, from the sociodemographic (i.e., being older), the economic and the health standpoints (Rump and Zwiener-Collins 2021; van der Meer et al. 2023). Other studies focused on the role of political variables. Eggers and Harding (2023) showed that the increase in trust in institutions was highest among who, in the first phases of the crisis, were less supportive of the incumbent government, while Johansson et al. (2021) found that satisfaction with the way the Swedish government addressed the pandemic showed a similar descending trend from April to August 2020 among individuals who classified themselves on the left, centre and right of the political spectrum.

1.2. Limitations of the extant literature

During the years of the pandemic, the literature on the impact of COVID-19 on institutional trust flourished. However, there are still no solid answers to three relevant research questions. The first concerns the precise duration of the rally effect and the long-term trend of the changes in institutional trust fostered by the exogenous shock (Johansson et al. 2021; Satherley et al. 2022). The few available longitudinal studies conducted during COVID-19 suggested that – consistent with the results from the studies conducted before the pandemic – the increase in trust in political institutions was a short-term change that lasted between two and eight months (Bäckgaard et al. 2020; Johansson et al. 2021; Kritzing et al. 2021). However, the vast majority of the extant studies do not include data from before the pandemic and subsequent. Thus, they take for granted more than study 'live' an actual rally effect. Moreover, the extant studies typically adopt a short-term perspective, with just a few waves conducted in a limited time span. This approach could be adequate when studying the 'classic' rally effects triggered by precise and well-delimited shocks such as wars and terrorist attacks. However, it is not much satisfactory as regards the specific crisis the pandemic determined, that had not a precise onset and a precise end and displayed itself for long years. This lack of knowledge about the medium- and long-term trends in the changes in institutional

trust triggered by COVID-19 is problematic not only from the theoretical point of view, but also in an applied perspective. Indeed, protracted pandemic crises require citizens to be compliant with authorities that ask the demanding behaviours needed to cope with the outbreak. Thus, a deep knowledge of the processes leading to changes in institutional trust is needed.

Second, most of the literature has examined rally effects in samples of the general population. However, less is known about how theoretically relevant specific subgroups respond to exogenous shocks (for a study focused on social trust, see [Wu et al. 2022](#)). As we stated above, a few studies focused on subgroups do exist. However, as they usually lack a pre-pandemic wave, they did not allow to analyse of the differences between these subgroups when the exogenous shock hits society and a rally effect could be expected. Interestingly, [Satherley et al. \(2022\)](#) included a pre-pandemic wave in their study. These authors showed an overall increase in trust in the governing party during the first five months of the pandemic, followed by a decline that occurred more rapidly among opposition party voters. These results are undoubtedly intriguing. However, they neglect those who do not place themselves on the left-right scale and the non-voters. This is problematic, in that these segments are numerically relevant: In the 9th wave of the European Social Survey, about the 15% of the sample did not answer to the question about their left-right self-placement and declining turnout affects the vast majority of the world ([Koch et al. 2021](#)). For example, in the recent Italian general election (September 2022), only the 61% of the voters went to the polls and cast a valid vote. In the 2018 and the 2013 elections, the rate was 70.3% and 72.5%, respectively. Beyond their numerical relevance, these groups are also politically relevant, as contested elections are often won by candidates' ability to mobilise a portion of citizens who are far from politics ([Hansford and Gomez 2010](#)).

The third limitation of the extant literature concerns the type of institutions considered. The typical rally effect study examines the evolution of trust in the national institutions (the U.S. president, government, public authorities, etc.) that are directly involved in managing the crisis ([Perrin and Smolek 2009](#)). However, this nearly exclusive focus on trust in political institutions limits our knowledge of the processes leading to rally around the flag. In times of crisis, do people increase their trust only in this kind of institutions or they also increase their trust in institutions not involved in the management of the emergency? If the rally effects were limited to trust in political institutions, this would suggest that the public opinion is subtle enough to discriminate between institutions and their functions, increasing trust only in those institutions that can actually help society cope with the exogenous shock. On the contrary, if the rally effects extend to institutions not involved in the management of the emergency, this would suggest that the social and psychological functions that rally effects serve are so relevant that they cause public opinion to generalize the increase in trust in institutions. To our knowledge, just a few studies tackled this research question. [Bol et al. \(2021\)](#) showed that the pandemic also increased satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in seven European countries, suggesting that it had an overall positive spillover effect on support for democratic institutions. Moreover, [Baekgaard et al. \(2020\)](#) observed a rally effect with respect to other public institutions, such as the judiciary, the legislature and the public sector in general, suggesting that trust in government may spill over to other institutions. However, as these studies did not have a pre-pandemic wave, we do not know have a solid answer to this research question.

1.3. The present study

1.3.1. The context: COVID-19 in Italy

We have conducted our research using Italy as case study. Italy is a particularly interesting context for a twofold reason. On the one hand, as mentioned above, it was the first European country to fight the COVID-19 emergency and paid one of the highest prices to the pandemic. In March 2020, Italy experienced the most active outbreak in the world ([Di Ciaula et al. 2020](#)), with alarming mortality rates: when the second wave of the for this study has been collected (April 2020), Italy had the second highest number of deaths in Europe ([Dowd et al. 2020](#)). On the other hand, Italy has traditionally been characterized by low trust in political institutions (e.g. [Gasperoni 2013](#)) not only in absolute terms, but also if compared to other European countries ([Archer and Ron-Levey 2020](#); [Eurofound 2018](#)). Consistent with this, Italy has experienced increasing electoral abstentionism in recent decades and has become one of the European countries where populist parties have become more successful ([Blokker and Anselmi 2019](#)). Political distrust is a characteristic phenomenon of many Western democracies, but the erosion of public trust was evident in Italy much earlier than in other countries and well before the trend of rising support for populist politics worldwide ([Segatti 2006](#)).

Against this background, thus, Italy is a particularly interesting country to study the medium- and long-term impact of COVID-19 on institutional trust, especially since a recent study of 25 European countries highlighted that institutional trust acted as a protective factor against COVID-19, even limiting virus-related mortality ([Oksanen et al. 2020](#)).

1.4. Goals and research questions

In this study, we attempted to overcome the three limitations of the extant literature highlighted above. We pursued three main research objectives with a 3.5-year, 7-wave longitudinal study. First, we wanted to analyse the long-term trend in institutional trust triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. We reasoned that in the first phases of the pandemic, citizens' reactions to the outbreak should have been mainly driven by emotions such as fear and anxiety and by a relevant loss of perceived control over their world that would have pushed them to rally around the flag, at least in part irrespective of the adequacy of the policies adopted to tackle the emergency ([Kritzinger et al. 2021](#)). After the most acute phase of the emergency, this suspension of judgment should have ended, and, as the weeks and months passed, the perceived trade-off between the positive and negative consequences of complying with unprecedented measures such as curfews, lockdowns and other severe restrictions on personal and social life plausibly changed (e.g., [Naumann et al. 2020](#)), leading citizens to evaluate more negatively the inevitable problems in the management of the crisis ([Roccatto et al. 2021](#)). Subsequently, when the crisis become normalized ([Johansson et al. 2021](#)), citizens should have started again to build their institutional

trust on rational evaluations of how the institutions managed the country (Bechtel and Mueller 2011; Colaresi 2007). In this light, we expected trust in political institutions to show a cubic trend, with an increase from T_1 and T_2 , a decrease in the subsequent waves and a final recovery to pre-pandemic levels.

Second, we wanted to advance the knowledge of the processes leading to rally effects by comparing the trend of trust toward three different types of institutions. The study of public institutions different from political institutions is theoretically important to establish the generality of these effects on the whole institutional system (Bol et al. 2021). In addition to traditional national political institutions, thus, we examined what happened to trust in national *super partes* (president of the Republic, judiciary and police) and international institutions (the European Union and the United Nations), which previous research has shown to be of interest in analysing the changes in public opinion triggered by COVID-19 (Cavazza et al. 2022). These other classes of institutions are relevant as concerns the spatial (Italy) and temporal (the COVID-19 pandemic) context of our study. On the one hand, the widespread distrust of political institutions, previously highlighted as a distinctive feature of Italy's contemporary political culture, does not extend to *super partes* institutions, that have little or no political connotation. On the other hand, in the initial phase of the COVID-19 outbreak, the responsibility for managing the pandemic was clearly assigned to national political institutions, which were seen as the public authority best suited to make decisions about the emergency. The coordination among countries even within the EU appeared to be extremely disjointed, and perceptions of increasing difficulties in international policy coordination fostered a general feeling of 'every country for itself' (Amat et al. 2020).

Due to the paucity of previous research on this topic, we set up two alternative expectations about the possible changes in trust in *super partes* and in international institutions. We assumed that if the rally effect triggered in the first weeks of the pandemic was generalised, institutional trust should have increased from T_1 to T_2 regardless of the class of institutions considered. This would be consistent with van der Meer (2017), according to which, as many citizens do not distinguish between public institutions, the reported trust in different political institutions (parliament and government, police and justice system) is strongly interrelated. In this light, the same rally effects should have been observed for trust in national political institutions as for trust in national *super partes* and international institutions. On the other hand, if public opinion is able to distinguish between the ways different institutions can cope with the crisis in response to the exogenous shock, trust in national *super partes* and in international institutions should not have increased during the first weeks of the pandemic. As no studies with a mid- or a long-term approach were available, we analysed the post- T_2 trend of trust in *super partes* and international institutions with an exploratory approach.

Finally, we sought to compare the above trends in institutional trust across different electoral segments. In contrast to previous literature (e.g., Johansson et al. 2021; Satherley et al. 2022), we chose to distinguish between populist voters, non-populist voters and non-voters, both because distrust of institutions is at the core of populist orientations (e.g., Mudde 2007) and because populist orientations played a relevant role in the pandemic (e.g., they led people to refuse to be vaccinated against COVID-19: see Roccato and Russo 2023). We based our reasoning on the idea that populist voters and non-voters had lower pre-crisis trust in national political institutions than non-populist voters (Hooghe et al. 2011) and had fewer options to cope with the threat of the pandemic by relying on the source of compensatory control represented by national political institutions. Apart from the chronic distrust, abstention from voting could also be an expression of low perceived efficacy, which could make the non-voters even less amenable to activation in terms of institutional trust. If their populism and non-participation are vulnerable to change, populists and non-voters should be the electoral segments that show the highest increase in trust in national political institutions during the first weeks of the pandemic. If, on the other hand, their populism and non-participation in the electoral game are highly resistant to change, populists and non-voters should not have increased their trust in national political institutions in the first weeks of the pandemic because of their chronic mistrust. However, if non-voters' alienation is limited to ordinary political issues, the dramatic shock of the pandemic may have made them less different from other voters in terms of rapidly increasing support for institutions. As we did not have a theoretical and/or empirical basis for developing hypotheses about the trend in the subsequent phases of the pandemic and about changes in trust in national *super partes* and international institutions, we used an exploratory approach to analyse them both in the first and in the subsequent phases of the pandemic.

Overall, in this study we analysed the long-term trend in institutional trust triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic and compares this trend with changes in trust toward other institutions, i.e., *super partes* and international institutions. We also analysed if and how these trends differ among non-populist voters, populist voters and non-voters.

2. Method

We pursued our research goals analysing the COCO (Consequences of COVID-19) dataset. The COCO sample is a quota sample of the adult Italian general population stratified by sex, age and geographic residence, surveyed by email seven times, in June 2019 (i.e., before the pandemic, T_1 , $N = 1504$), April 2020 (T_2 , $N = 1199$), October 2020 (T_3 , $N = 1156$), April 2021 (T_4 , $N = 1148$), October 2021 (T_5 , $N = 1151$), April 2022 (T_6 , $N = 1150$), and October 2022 (T_7 , $N = 1150$). Starting at T_4 , new respondents were integrated into the samples in addition to those already contacted at T_1 . Specifically, these were 118 respondents at T_4 , 236 at T_5 , 192 at T_6 , and 211 at T_7 . At T_1 , the sample consisted of 51.1% women, the mean age was 47.8 years ($SD = 15.06$), 26.6% of respondents lived in the north-west of the country, 18.9% in the north-east, 19.4% in the centre, 23.3% in the south and the remaining 11.8% in the islands. The Bio-ethical Committee of the University of Turin approved the study (protocol 181,488).

2.1. Measures

In all waves, we examined participants' trust in three types of institutions using eight items taken from the European Social Survey

(see <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org>) and previously used in research on rally effects (see Cavazza et al. 2022). The items assessed trust in political institutions (political parties, parliament and local administrations; α ranged from 0.81 at T₂ to 0.88 at T₇), in *super partes* national institutions (president of the Republic, judiciary and police; α ranged from 0.73 at T₁ to 0.78 at T₇) and in international institutions (the European Union and the United Nations; α ranged from 0.79 at T₂ to 0.87 at T₆). Because an 11-category format was used in the first wave and a 10-category format in subsequent waves, we rescaled the items from the first wave to a range of 1–10 before averaging them.

At T₁, there was an item on how participants voted in the 2019 European elections. Based on the Populism and Political Parties (POPPA) Expert Survey (Meijers and Zaslove 2021), we compared voters of the most populist parties, namely Lega (the League), Movimento 5 Stelle (the Five Star Movement) or Fratelli d'Italia (the Brothers of Italy) (=1, $n = 639$), with voters of non-populist parties, namely Forza Italia (Let's Go Italy), Sinistra Italiana (Italian Left) or Partito Democratico (Democratic Party) (=0, $n = 408$) and non-voters (=2, $n = 457$). Electoral choice in the 2019 European election was used to create three groups and compare trajectories of institutional trust.

2.2. Analytical strategy

As a first step, we used latent growth curve models to examine the trajectories of change in institutional trust over time (see Fig. 1). These models allowed us to estimate the initial level of institutional trust and its evolution over time, modelled as latent factors. In these models, the latent intercepts reflect the mean level of institutional trust at the time of initial assessment, while the latent slopes reflect the magnitude of change over time. Because seven time points were available, we were able to estimate quadratic and cubic slopes in addition to the linear slope. We used Maximum Likelihood (ML) estimation and conducted all analyses using Mplus version 8 (Muthén and Muthén, 1998–2017). To find the best-fitting models, we examined four nested models for each family of institutional trust (i.e., trust in political institutions, in *super partes* institutions and in international institutions): no change (i.e., intercept-only), linear change, quadratic change and cubic change. We determined the best-fitting model by examining the χ^2 difference: If it is significant, it means that the model fit is significantly increased by adding a growth function. On the other hand, if it is not significant, it means that adding a growth function does not improve the model, and the more parsimonious model should be preferred.

After identifying the best-fitting model, we used a piecewise approach to decompose the trend in institutional trust over time. This approach allowed us to test for differences in trajectories among populists (those who voted for a populist party at T₁), non-populists (those who voted for another party) and non-voters at T₁ using multiple group comparisons. To answer our third set of questions, we created piecewise models so that we could compare the initial shift in institutional trust (from T₁ to T₂, first piece) and the subsequent evolution of trust (from T₂ to T₇, second piece). We conducted a multiple group analysis to test the imposition of structural invariance constraints between groups. Starting with a model in which all structural parameters were free to vary between groups, we imposed equality constraints on the intercepts and the growth functions in turn (Chou and Bentler, 2002). We used Chi-Square difference tests to compare the less constrained model with the more constrained model (Kline and Rex, 2011). A significant χ^2 difference value indicates that constraining the path to be equal across groups worsens the model fit and the less constrained model should be retained, whereas a nonsignificant difference indicates that the two models fit the data equally well and therefore the more constrained/parsimonious model should be retained.

3. Results

We used latent growth curve models to pursue our first and second objectives, which were to analyse long-term trend in institutional trust and to compare the trend of trust in three different institutions (i.e., political, *super partes* and international institutions). Table 1 shows the comparisons between latent change models for trust in political, in *super partes* and international institutions. Based on the $\Delta\chi^2$, we identified the model with a cubic change as the best-fitting model for all types of institutions. This indicates that change in institutional trust followed a non-linear trend, which was characterized by two inflection points. The parameters of the cubic change

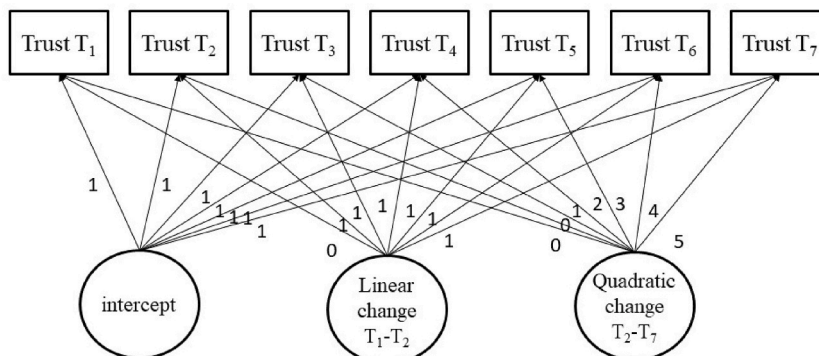


Fig. 1. The tested model.

Table 1
Comparison of latent growth models for institutional trust.

Trust in political institutions					
Model:	$\chi^2(df)$	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	$\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df)$
1 Intercept only	409.155(26)	.081	.926	.940	
2 Linear	192.350(23)	.058	.967	.970	216.805(3), $p < .001$
3 Quadratic	165.488(19)	.059	.972	.969	26.862(4), $p < .001$
4 Cubic	111.636(14)	.056	.981	.972	53.852(5), $p < .001$
Trust in <i>super partes</i> institutions					
Model:	$\chi^2(df)$	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	$\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df)$
1 Intercept only	328.167(26)	.072	.953	.962	
2 Linear	167.057(23)	.053	.977	.979	161.110(3), $p < .001$
3 Quadratic	130.855(19)	.051	.983	.981	36.202(4), $p < .001$
4 Cubic	105.674(14)	.054	.986	.979	25.181(5), $p < .001$
Trust in international institutions					
Model:	$\chi^2(df)$	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	$\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df)$
1 Intercept only	374.707(26)	.078	.939	.951	
2 Linear	267.296(23)	.069	.957	.961	107.411(3), $p < .001$
3 Quadratic	163.706(19)	.058	.975	.972	103.59(4), $p < .001$
4 Cubic	53.608(14)	.036	.993	.990	110.098(5), $p < .001$

Note. $N = 2226$. Best fit indices are shown in bold. $\Delta\chi^2$ compares each model with the previous one.

models are listed in Table 2. Fig. 2 shows the estimated cubic model for trust in all types of institutions. In this figure, as in the following figures, the estimated means of trust of all data collections are plotted using a partial scale on the y-axis to allow visual inspection of the 95% confidence intervals. As shown in the figure, trust in political institutions slightly increased between T_1 and T_2 , showing the expected rally effect, and decreased following a quadratic trend after T_2 . This trend is consistent with our expectations that trust would increase after the COVID-19 onset and decrease thereafter. Regarding trust in *super partes* institutions, it decreased slightly between T_1 and T_2 , and continued to decrease thereafter, suggesting that people discriminate between different institutions. Finally, the figure shows a steep decline in trust in international institutions between T_1 and T_2 , followed by a regression to pre-pandemic levels. Overall, these results show that the rally effects only affected trust in political institutions. They also show that rally effects are relatively short-lived, as they subside after three years.

To pursue our third goal (to compare trends in institutional trust across different electoral segments), we adopted a piecewise approach that allowed us to disaggregate changes in trust for further comparison. We modelled changes in trust through the mean of two pieces: The first one identified changes between T_1 and T_2 with a linear growth function, and the second one identified changes between T_2 and T_7 with a quadratic growth function. We then compared these piecewise models among three electoral groups: populists, non-populists and non-voters. The results of these comparisons are reported in Table A1 in the online supplementary material. Regarding trust in political institutions, multiple group comparisons revealed that non-populists and populists had similar levels of trust in political institutions at T_1 (equality of intercepts). Non-populist voters and non-voters showed similar increases in trust between T_1 and T_2 (equality of linear change), whereas this was not the case for populist voters. Finally, changes in trust between T_2 and T_7 (equality of quadratic change) were similar across groups.

The final model, which included the above equality constraints, had excellent fit indices: $\chi^2(60) = 138.566$, $RMSEA = 0.051$, $CFI = 0.984$, $TLI = 0.983$. The parameters of this model are listed in Table 3. Fig. 3 shows the trajectories of trust in political institutions in different electoral segments.

Regarding trust in *super partes* institutions, the analyses revealed that the initial levels of trust differed significantly among the three groups considered, while both the linear change T_1 - T_2 and the quadratic change T_2 - T_7 did not differ among the groups (see Table A2 in online supplementary material). The final model had excellent fit indices: $\chi^2(60) = 162.415$, $RMSEA = 0.058$, $CFI = 0.983$, $TLI = 0.982$. The parameters of this model are listed in Table 3 and Fig. 4 shows the trajectories of trust in *super partes* institutions in the different electoral segments.

Finally, regarding trust in international institutions, we found that initial levels did not differ between populist voters and non-voters. The linear changes T_1 - T_2 and the quadratic changes T_2 - T_7 did not differ between all groups (see Table A3 in the online supplementary material). The final model had excellent fit indices: $\chi^2(61) = 153.339$, $RMSEA = 0.055$, $CFI = 0.982$, $TLI = 0.981$. The

Table 2
Parameters for the latent change model, cubic change.

Trust in:	Political institutions			<i>Super partes</i> institutions			International institutions		
	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p
Intercept	4.551	0.045	<.001	6.011	0.045	<.001	5.429	0.050	<.001
Linear	0.383	0.087	<.001	0.092	0.084	.273	-1.177	0.090	<.001
Quadratic	-0.415	0.063	<.001	-0.203	0.061	.001	0.773	0.065	<.001
Cubic	0.081	0.012	<.001	0.045	0.011	<.001	-0.130	0.012	<.001

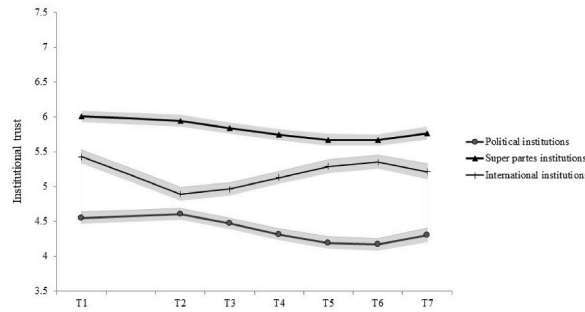


Fig. 2. Institutional trust: trends over three years (the trends and their 95% confidence intervals are displayed).

Table 3

Parameters for comparisons in trends in institutional trust among different electoral segments.

	Political institutions			Non-populist voters			Populist voters			Non-voters		
	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p
Intercept	4.751	0.056	<.001	4.751	0.056	<.001	4.011	0.083	<.001	4.011	0.083	<.001
Linear T ₁ -T ₂	0.370	0.054	<.001	-0.049	0.061	0.419	0.370	0.054	<.001	0.370	0.054	<.001
Linear T ₂ -T ₇	-0.338	0.032	<.001	-0.338	0.032	<.001	-0.338	0.032	<.001	-0.338	0.032	<.001
Quadratic T ₂ -T ₇	0.052	0.006	<.001	0.052	0.006	<.001	0.052	0.006	<.001	0.052	0.006	<.001
Super partes institutions												
	Non-populist voters			Populist voters			Non-voters					
	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p			
Intercept	6.821	0.084	<.001	5.840	0.070	<.001	5.591	0.085	<.001			
Linear T ₁ -T ₂	0.051	0.041	0.220	0.051	0.041	0.220	0.051	0.041	0.220			
Linear T ₂ -T ₇	-0.247	0.028	<.001	-0.247	0.028	<.001	-0.247	0.028	<.001			
Quadratic T ₂ -T ₇	0.041	0.006	<.001	0.041	0.006	<.001	0.041	0.006	<.001			
International institutions												
	Non-populist voters			Populist voters			Non-voters					
	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p			
Intercept	6.480	0.087	<.001	5.018	0.062	<.001	5.018	0.062	<.001			
Linear T ₁ -T ₂	-0.661	0.048	<.001	-0.661	0.048	<.001	-0.661	0.048	<.001			
Linear T ₂ -T ₇	0.220	0.035	<.001	0.220	0.035	<.001	0.220	0.035	<.001			
Quadratic T ₂ -T ₇	-0.028	0.007	<.001	-0.028	0.007	<.001	-0.028	0.007	<.001			

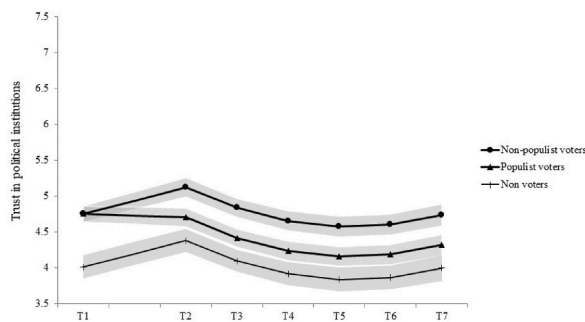


Fig. 3. Trust in political institutions among different electoral segments (the trends and their 95% confidence intervals are displayed).

parameters of this model are listed in Table 3, and Fig. 5 shows the trajectories of trust in international institutions in the different electoral segments.

4. Discussion

Much has been said about the political consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, several studies have documented that the outbreak triggered an increase in institutional trust in almost all countries studied (e.g. Bol et al. 2021) in the first months of

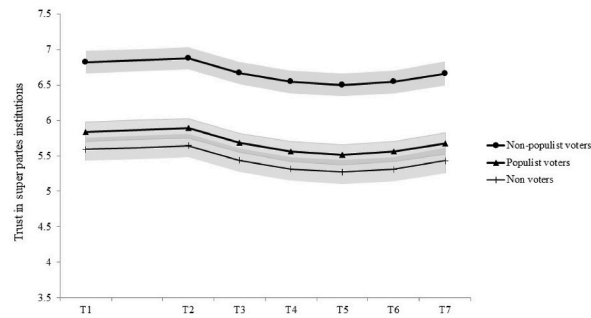


Fig. 4. Trust in *super partes* institutions among different electoral segments (the trends and their 95% confidence intervals are displayed).

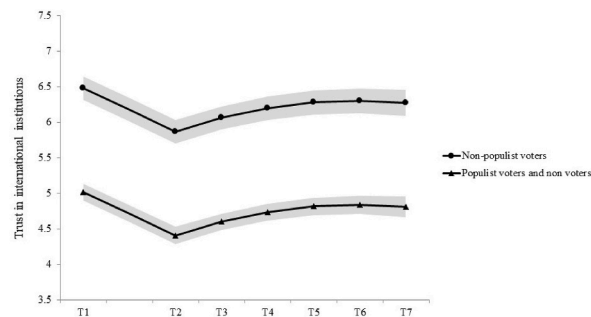


Fig. 5. Trust in international institutions among different electoral segments (the trends and their 95% confidence intervals are displayed).

pandemic, demonstrating the activation of a “rally ‘round the flag effect” (Mueller 1970). To our knowledge, while there is evidence of the short-term changes in institutional trust, results for the medium- and long-term period remain scarce (Johansson et al. 2021; Satherley et al. 2022). The first goal of this study was to fill this knowledge gap by examining the long-term trend of institutional trust using 3.5-year longitudinal data, with a pre-pandemic wave and 6 post-pandemic waves. Consistent with the literature (e.g. Bækgaard et al. 2020; Johansson et al. 2021), our results showed that trust in political institutions increased after the onset of the COVID-19 outbreak (April 2020) and then decreased within a few months (October 2020), confirming that rally effects were short-lived in the context of the pandemic (e.g., Bækgaard et al. 2020; Johansson et al. 2021; Kritzinger et al. 2021; Satherley et al. 2022). Thus, our results support the idea that political institutions in times of crisis are rarely able to translate the initial rally effect into long-term support (Johansson et al. 2021; Woods 2011). Moreover, they are consistent with a conceptualization of the rally effect as something that goes beyond simply promoting patriotism or zealous support for political elites (Mueller 1970) to also elicit ‘feelings of allegiance toward national political institutions and policies’ (Parker 1995, p. 526). Indeed, our unidimensional political trust index was composed of three political institutions (political parties, parliament and local administrations). The generalised increase in support for democratic institutions is consistent with recent studies in time of COVID-19 that showed that the outbreak influenced trust in the entire political system (e.g., Bækgaard et al. 2020; Bol et al. 2021).

Our long-term longitudinal approach allowed us to add to the literature a look on what happens after the expected rally effect. In the years after the onset of the pandemic, citizens’ trust in political institutions had a negative trend from October 2020 to April 2022, followed by a positive trend from April 2022 to October 2022, when political trust substantially returned to pre-pandemic levels. The overall cubic trend (trust increased with the onset of the pandemic, decreased in the subsequent years and recovered in the following months, attesting itself to the pre-pandemic level) is compatible with the idea that in the medium- and long-term, citizens’ reactions to exogenous shocks are mainly driven by a three-step process, governed by fear and anxiety in the first phases of crisis (Kritzinger et al. 2021), by a rebound effect characterized by a negative evaluation of how the political institutions manage the emergency (Roccatò et al. 2021) in the second phase and by a return to a rational evaluation of how the institutions actually manage the country (Bechtel and Mueller 2011; Colaresi 2007) in the third phase, when the crisis becomes normalized (Johansson et al. 2021). A direct test of this interpretation could be one of the research challenges to be taken when societies will have to face the next dramatic exogenous shock.

Our second goal was to examine whether the processes underlying rally effects can trigger a general positive spillover effect on support for other public institutions. While during the first peak of the COVID-19 pandemic Italians’ trust in political institutions increased, trust in other institutions decreased, slightly for *super partes* institutions and strongly for international institutions. We can consequently rule out a general spillover scenario. Overall, these results speak in favour of Mueller’s (1970) classic conception of rally effects as ‘specific, dramatic, and sharply focused’ events (p. 21). Moreover, they help advance our knowledge on the changes of institutional trust due to exogenous shocks, showing that the public opinion is able to react to emergencies discriminating among different classes of institutions, as a function of their possibility to act to tackle the crisis. Thus, rally effects proved to fulfil their social (to help society react quickly, efficiently and in a unitary manner to the crisis: see Chatagnier 2012) and psychological (to increase

people's subjective well-being via the enhancement of their perceived control over the world: see [Roccatò et al. 2021](#)) functions in a subtle and delimited way, being plausibly governed by a mix of emotional and rational drivers. The COCO data do not allow a direct analysis of the processes behind these different trends. However, we argue that the fundamental moral role of the Italian President of the Republic and the public order role of the police and the judiciary were not crucial in the complex scenario of the outbreak. Moreover, before the pandemic they were characterized by higher levels of trust than political institutions. In this light, it is not much surprising that these institutions could not directly benefit from the rally effect. In its turn, the decrease in trust in international institutions is consistent with [Cavazza et al.'s \(2022\)](#) idea that the COVID-19 pandemic increased the salience of the national social identities and weakened the supra-national identification. This idea found at least two empirical supports. On the one hand, [Gustavsson and Taghizadeh \(2023\)](#) showed that in emergency situations trust in political leaders increases as they are seen as symbols of a national identity threatened by the crisis. On the other hand, [Amat et al. \(2020\)](#) showed a strong preference for a national over an internationally coordinated response in Spain in the case of the COVID-19 crisis, much stronger than in the management of other international crises, such as international terrorism and climate change. In this light, it is likely that the public opinion shift triggered by pandemics transcended the national boundaries of the involved institutions by inversely generating a distrust effect toward international institutions as a kind of 'counter-rally-effect'.

In spite of its short-term differences, trust in the three classes of institutions we considered had a similar medium- and long-term trend: after 3.5 years from the onset of the pandemic, it substantially went back to the pre-pandemic level. Beyond short-term fluctuations, this result confirms that the normalization process of pandemics on the public opinion is generalizable in the long-term across more types of public institutions. The duration of political attitude change is transitory and the effect completely levels off over three years.

As concerns our third research goal, the comparison of trends across voter segments showed that the rally effect on national political institutions was limited to non-populist voters and non-voters, while it was absent among populist voters. This lack of rally effect suggests that populists' institutional distrust is rather resistant to change. Realistically, this reduces significantly their opportunities to cope with exogenous shocks by relying on institutional trust as source of compensatory control. However, the same did not hold for non-voters, for whom the rally effect was evident and similar to that for non-populist voters. This is consistent with the idea that dramatic events such as pandemics can inspire acts of unity and large-scale calls to action ([Strong 1990](#)), involving people who do not normally participate in the ordinary political life. In this light, non-voters responded to the crisis by putting aside their political dissatisfactions and grievances and their pre-existing political differences, helping society to confront the threat quickly and efficiently as a single unit ([Chatagnier 2012](#)). This finding indirectly highlights that in Italy many people have used non-voting in recent years as a means of accountability ([Powell 2000](#)), rather than an expression of alienation or low internal efficacy. Based on [Hirschman \(1970\)](#), another interpretation of this result could be that populist voting, in contrast to non-voting, is an expression of political commitment determined by choice of 'voice' rather than by the choice of 'exit'. For this reason, in the Italian political scenario, where the response to the pandemic was polarized along party-political lines, the positions of populist parties (such as the permanent opposition of the Brothers of Italy or the ambivalence of the League) may have limited the rally effect on their voters and not also on non-voters. This interpretation is consistent with previous research that has shown that weaker rally effects, as in the U.S. ([Motta et al. 2020](#)), are found in more party politically polarized environments ([Brody and Shapiro 1989](#); [Hetherington and Nelson 2003](#)). The lack of a rally effect among populist voters also confirms the antagonistic nature of populist responses to pandemic-related government actions, without a consistent ideological stance: sometimes accusing governments of not doing enough and other times of doing too much ([Mudde 2020](#)). A confirmation of this idea comes from the fact that populist and mainstream voters had similar trends in trust in *super partes* and international institutions. Indeed, this result is consistent with an antagonistic evaluation of populist voters only with respect to pandemic management by political institutions, which was not observed for the other institutions. A replication of this study conducted when societies will have to tackle the next exogenous shocks could be interesting, to analyse the robustness of this interpretation.

The new findings from our study raise some issues that could be addressed in future research to overcome the limitations of this study. First, in the data we analysed, trust was assessed using a self-report method in all of the institutions studied. Therefore, we may have underestimated the differences between trust in the three categories of institutions we focused on, as our estimates may be partially distorted by the common method bias fostered by responding to a battery of items. We invite future researchers on this topic to consider this potential bias when designing their studies. Moreover, consistent with the idea that public opinion changes may vary across countries ([Kritzinger et al. 2021](#)) future studies could examine the generality of these effects through a cross-national survey. We conducted our study in Italy, which paid a dramatic price in terms of health, economy and lifestyles during the period of COVID-19. Moreover, in the last decade Italy has become one of the European countries where anti-politics is a widespread phenomenon, with the increase of electoral choices such as voting populist or not voting. If data were available, new studies could conduct a cross-national replication of this research in countries less affected by the pandemic and with a different political culture.

Second, Italy faced persistent political instability during the three years of data collection, with three different governments in the same legislature. This political uncertainty may have affected some dynamics related to the changes in institutional trust. We assume that this limitation is not so relevant because in the two waves in which the most relevant changes occurred (T_2 and T_3 , April and October 2020, respectively), the government (the second government led by Conte) was the same. However, future studies could also examine the long-term trends of the rally effect in countries that have experienced a period of relative political stability. Third, we focused our study on populist votes, not populist orientations. Recently, populism has been shown take on different trends in behavioural or attitudinal dimensions during periods of COVID-19 ([Russo et al. submitted](#)). Future studies that consider both dimensions and examine the difference between populist orientation and voting behaviour when analysing rally effects may be interesting.

Third, the analogous pre-pandemic level of trust in political institutions showed by populist and non-populist voters may appear surprising. However, in June 2019 Italy was governed by a populist cabinet. This could have made the ‘dispositional’ and the ‘situational’ degree of institutional trust of populist and non-populist come close. The variables included in the COCO dataset could not be used to test this interpretation, that could be tested in future studies.

These limitations should be weighed against the strengths of the present study. Rarely do considerations of rally effects rely on empirical data collected in medium- and long-term longitudinal studies. Because of the nature of our dataset, our approach allowed us to define a trend over a long period of time. Because we also included a pre-pandemic wave, the outcomes observed in our models of change can be interpreted as potentially caused by the pandemic outbreak. In this regard, our analytical strategy could be considered the more accurate test for examining long-term rally effects triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, as recently pointed out (Pignataro 2021), the puzzle is not whether the pandemic is causing the rally, but who is rallying and why. With this in mind, we have shown that rally effect does not hold for populist voters. An interesting challenge for future research would be to ask why, by identifying potential mediating/moderating variables, such as voting for the opposition/incumbent party or left-right positioning, and empirically test their effects. Even before performing these extensions, however, we believe that we have significantly contributed to the literature on rally effects, showing some previously unknown nuances and functions.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2024.102986>.

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