

A scandal effect? Local scandals and political trust

*Scandals that hit political institutions and their actors are likely to contribute to lowering political trust. However, few studies examine the accuracy of such **relationship at the local level**. This article aims to contribute to the field by assessing the impact of local scandals on trust **in local government and the mayor in the context of a federal State, Belgium**. The research relies on an original dataset **that includes** a selection of municipalities that were hit by a scandal and of municipalities that were not in the running-up of the 2018 local elections. Our findings suggest the existence of a 'scandal effect' on voters' trust **in local government and Mayor**. First, trust in local **institutions** appears significantly lower in municipalities that were hit by a scandal. Second, the effect of scandals at the individual level **appears to be reinforced** by voters' perception of trustworthiness of local politicians: scandals more significantly affect trust in local government among voters who evaluate negatively local politicians.*

1. Introduction

Political scandals have become a regular part of contemporary elections and electoral campaigns (Kumlin and Esaiasson 2011; von Sikorski et al. 2020), as news media have increasingly reported about political malpractices worldwide (Allern et al. 2012). The publicization of a political scandal is inherent to its definition (Thompson 2000; Allern and Sikoski 2018): indeed, political scandals can be considered ‘as real or conjectured norm violations of political actors or institutions that are repeatedly reported on and framed by the news media and other actors as scandalous’ (Allern and Sikoski 2018, p. 3015).

Accordingly, scholars have questioned the consequences of political scandals on public opinion and on the polity, especially in electoral contexts (von Sikorski 2018). One crucial question has concerned the extent to which political scandals could change the outcome of subsequent elections (Pattie and Johnson 2012; Welch and Hibbing 1997). At the individual level, scholars have thus examined how political scandals could affect the way voters evaluate parties and candidates (Carlson et al. 2000; Funk, 1996; Mitchell, 2014; von Sikorski et al. 2020), and how much scandal could eventually change voting behavior (Cobb and Taylor, 2015; Muñoz et al. 2016). Beyond electoral consequences, scandals could also have a potential ‘corrosive’ (Ares and Hernández 2017) or ‘spill-over’ effect on political trust and political support (Bowler and Karp 2004; Chanley et al. 2000; Lee 2018; Maier 2011; Schwarz and Bless 1992; van Elsas et al. 2020; von Sikorski et al. 2020). Aggregate-level perspectives indeed suggest a detrimental effect of scandal on trust (Chanley et al. 2000), while individual-level findings are more nuanced, and point to the role of moderating factors, such as knowledge and prior politicians’ evaluation (Elsas et al. 2020; Lee 2018; von Sikorski et al. 2020).

Remarkably, the existing literature has focused mostly on national-level dynamics (and/or supranational ones, see van Elsas et al. 2020). With only a handful exceptions (Muñoz et al. 2016; Solé-Ollé and Sorribas-Navarro 2018), the local level has remained largely under-investigated in the debate about scandals and trust: generally, *national* political scandals have been taken into account, in relation to trust in national government (Chanley et al. 2000; Lee 2018) or national politicians (Ares and Hernández 2017; von Sikorski et al. 2020; Schwarz and Bless 1992). This article aims to contribute to that research question, by focusing on the impact of *local* scandals on political trust in *local* governments and in the mayor – by contrast to trust in regional and national government. –, and by considering the moderating effect of voters' evaluation of *local* politicians. Local politics and politicians are very close to citizens and potentially more subject to direct public scrutiny. Traditionally, political trust is found to be higher at the local level (Bouckaert et al. 2004; Jennings 1998; Van Roosbroek 2006). Furthermore, Jennings (1998) argues that confidence in local governments builds on perceptions with regard to accountability, accessibility and responsiveness, while trust in higher levels relates to assessments of power and performance. We, therefore, expect local-level affairs to have a distinctive impact on local political trust, while also eventually 'spilling over' to other levels of government.

In this perspective, we rely on data collected by the Belgian exit poll survey, organized during the local elections of October 2018. During the 2012-2018 local legislature, different municipalities – spread over all three Belgian regions (Brussels-Capital, Flanders and Wallonia) – were hit by scandals involving local political figures, which attracted significant media and public attention. The exit poll was conducted in a representative sample of Belgian municipalities, and it therefore included some municipalities that were hit by a scandal and some municipalities that were not,

which enables a fine-grained comparison between voters living in these different municipalities. This enables us to observe the effect of real scandal cases, across multiple local contexts.

The article is structured as follows. The first section presents existing empirical knowledge on the link between scandals and political trust and formulates several hypotheses. The second section describes the data and variables used in the analysis. The third section explores the impact of scandals on voters' level of trust, first in a simple descriptive way, then by providing more sophisticated multivariate analysis. A final section discusses the existence of a so-called local 'scandal effect' on voters' local political trust. This effect is threefold. First, trust in local political government and in the mayor appears significantly lower among voters from a municipality that was hit by a scandal. Second, the effect of scandals at the individual level appears to vary according to voters' perception of trustworthiness of local politicians: scandals negatively and significantly affect trust in local government and in the mayor among voters who evaluate politicians negatively. Third, local scandals seem to have a contrasting impact on trust in upper-level government.

2. Scandals and political trust

Political trust can be considered as citizens' confidence in political institutions and actors, or as 'the belief in the righteousness of these political institutions and the regime of which they are part' (Turper and Aarts 2017, p. 417). As such, political trust is a central indicator of political legitimacy. However, scientific debates exist regarding the one-dimensional or multidimensionality of the concept (Hooghe 2011; Fisher et al. 2010). We share Fisher et al.'s (2010) argument that political trust should be seen as multidimensional, and that the 'different forms of trust judgements are of

differing significance depending upon the institution under consideration' (Fisher et al. 2010, p.161). In this contribution, we consider trust *in government* at several tiers of government (local, regional, and national) as well as trust in one specific individual politician, namely the 'mayor' which the central political figure in local politics.

Previous research has put forth the crucial relationship between citizens' levels of political trust and citizens' evaluations of political performance and the incumbent government's actions (Finkel et al. 1989; Keele 2007). These actions may first refer to the type of policies implemented that would more or less meet voters' expectations, like the health of the economy and the levels of crime (Chanley et al. 2000; Keele 2007). These actions can also refer to politicians (un)ethical and (im)moral attitudes and behaviors. The extent to which political corruption in general (Linde and Erlingsson 2013), and the occurrence of political scandals more specifically (von Sikorski 2018), may affect citizens' political behavior and attitudes, including political trust, has been vastly discussed in the last decades.

At first glance, experimental studies using fictitious cases suggest that politicians involved in scandals will have more negative evaluations (Carlson et al. 2000; Funk 1996; Mitchell 2014); and will be punished for their involvement in scandals at the ballot box (Winters and Weitz-Shapiro 2016). However, other empirical examinations analyzing scandals as 'natural events' show more contrasted findings (von Sikorski et al. 2020). Scandals would sometimes have minor effects on voting intentions for the party or politicians involved (Cobb and Taylor, 2015), and voters would only mildly punish politicians who have shown corrupt behavior (De Vries and Solaz 2017; Muñoz et al. 2016). The impact of scandals and corruption would in fact vary across individuals, depending on their access and (frequency of) exposure to scandal information, perception of candidates' traits,

and partisanship (Anderson and Tverdova 2003; Bhatti et al. 2013; Breitenstein 2019; Mitchell 2014). Muñoz et al. (2016) also suggest, using experimental vignettes in a survey conducted in Catalonia, that informed voters may still support corrupt Mayors because they have a strong performance record (see also Breitenstein 2019 on this trade-off hypothesis), or because corruption accusations from the opposition are not perceived as credible.

Some research focuses on the impact of politicians' malpractices and of scandal exposure on voters' political trust. Aggregate-level perspectives suggest a detrimental effect of (reports of) political scandals on trust in government (Chanley et al. 2000; Pharr and Putnam 2000). At the individual level, empirical studies point to a certain 'spill-over' (Schwarz and Bless 1992; Lee 2018; von Sikorski et al. 2020) or 'corrosive' (Ares and Hernández 2017) effect of scandals on political trust. Scandals would not only harm voters' trust in the individual politicians directly involved in the specific scandals but would also be detrimental to trust in other politicians (Bowler and Karp 2004; Maier 2011), in government (Lee 2018) or in other institutions (van Elsas et al. 2020), through an 'assimilation' effect (Schwarz and Bless, 1992). At the local level, Solé-Ollé and Sorribas-Navarro (2018) show, in the Spanish context, that a significant percentage of the population shifts from trusting to not trusting local politicians as a result of a corruption scandal in the municipality. In addition, with regard to local differences, Bowler and Karp (2004) find general distrust to be greater in districts where legislators are more strongly involved in scandals, based on data collected in the U.K. and the U.S. On the basis of these studies, we expect trust in government in general to be lower in 'scandal' municipalities (i.e. where local officials were involved in scandals in the months preceding the election) than in 'non-scandal' ones.

H.1: Trust in government is lower in municipalities where a scandal affected local officials than in municipalities without scandal.

Our second hypothesis (see below) expects that the occurrence of a local scandal will not affect levels of trust in different tiers of government to the same extent. We rely on Fisher et al. (2010) and consider that voters may perceive these institutions differently and are able to differentiate between political objects when making trust evaluations. This assumption is in line with existing research highlighting the differentiated impact of scandals on specific dimensions of political trust and political support. Maier (2011) for instance, shows, through an experimental study conducted in Germany, that exposure to scandals may erode trust in politicians and parties, while not affecting other dimensions of political support, namely trust in institutions and satisfaction with democracy. Van Elsas et al. 2020 examine the impact of political malfunctioning in the European Commission on trust in European and national institutions. They find evidence that knowledge of the political malpractice affair only leads to negative evaluations of the involved institution itself (van Elsas et al. 2020). Their findings suggest that citizens are sophisticated enough to differentiate between both European and national institutions and between different EU institutions, with trust in the European Commission affected the most. Besides, their findings ‘highlights the evaluative nature of political trust’ (p.944).

We expect that the same will hold true for subnational governments: confidence in subnational governments reflects national trends, but also exhibits unique dynamics explained by specific factors related to subnational politics (Wolak and Kelleher 2010). As citizens seem to be able to discern between policy levels, we expect that local scandals will particularly and negatively affect trust in local institutions (i.e. the municipality government and mayor) and that trust in the regional and federal governments will be affected only to a limited extent. In a way, this relates to the attribution theory (Weiner 1985, von Sikorski et al. 2020) which implies that individuals’

perceptions of politicians will be a function of their perception whether these politicians are in control for the scandalous political misbehavior or not. Therefore, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H.2: The occurrence of a scandal in a municipality will more significantly affect trust in local government and in the mayor than trust in governments at upper tiers.

While the first two hypotheses deal with the effect of a specific context (scandal vs. no scandal in the municipality) on levels of trust, the next hypotheses dig into differences between citizens. Irrespective of the occurrence of a scandal in their municipality, citizens may hold different perceptions of the politicians' integrity and trustworthiness, or, in other words, may express different degrees of political cynicism (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Lee 2018). These perceptions strongly relate to levels of trust towards these same politicians but can also affect trust in political institutions. We expect that the evaluation and perception of *local politicians'* trustworthiness, whatever the context (scandal municipality or not), will affect the level of trust in the local authorities, namely the local government and the mayor.

H.3. The more negative the evaluation of local politicians, the lower the level of trust in local government and in the mayor.

Finally, and more crucially, we aim to assess the moderating effect of voters' attitudes towards local politicians in the relationship between local scandals and local political trust. Building on Lee (2018), Dancey (2012) and von Sikorski et al. (2020), we think that the spill-over effect of a local

scandal will be mediated by voters' (pre-existing) attitudes *vis-à-vis* politicians. Our expectations can go into two directions, according to previous findings.

On the one hand, the findings of von Sikorski et al. (2020) indicate that the negative effect of scandal on trust would be stronger among individuals who hold prior positive candidate evaluations. The analysis of Kumlin and Esaiasson (2011), based on a longitudinal European study on scandal elections and satisfaction with democracy, point to what they call a 'scandal fatigue': citizens ascribe less importance to scandals as these become more common and cumulate over time. Citizens seem to become uninterested in scandals that once evoked reactions. According to these perspectives, we could expect that citizens who have a negative evaluation of politicians would be less affected by the occurrence of a scandal. In other words, local scandals would have a weaker spill-over effect on trust among respondents who already have a negative perception of local politicians. For those respondents, the 'worm is already in the fruit' and the political scandals that took place are somehow 'a mere confirmation' of the corrupted behavior of politicians. Hence, scandals would only be detrimental to trust among respondents who have not yet reached a certain 'threshold' of negative perceptions.

H.4.a: Trust in local government and in the mayor is more negatively affected by a local scandal among voters with positive or neutral perceptions of local politicians than among voters with negative attitudes.

On the other hand, Dancey (2012) concludes that individuals' prior levels of political cynicism toward politicians played an important role when assessing new scandalous information, in the sense that cynics were more likely to interpret ambiguous information in a way that negatively reflected on the actors involved. In a similar vein, Lee (2018) reveals that the negative spill-over

effect of a scandal on citizens' perception of government performance will be stronger among the most cynical respondents – in other words, a scandal has a stronger negative effect when individuals hold negative perceptions of politicians' trustworthiness. Accordingly, we could expect that local scandals will more negatively affect trust in local government and in the mayor among respondents with negative opinions vis-à-vis the local politicians' trustworthiness.

H.4.b: Trust in local government and in the mayor is more negatively affected by a local scandal among voters with negative perceptions of local politicians than among voters with positive or neutral attitudes.

We will test these alternative hypotheses by using interaction effects in multivariate models.

3. Case selection, data and methods

3.1. The Belgian 2018 local elections context

In Belgium, municipal elections are held every six years. These elections are not synchronized with other tiers of government (federal, regional and European elections)¹. Since the 2006 elections, the three Belgian regions – i.e. Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels-Capital Region – are responsible for the organization of local elections (Bouhon and Reuchamps 2018). Despite increasing differences

¹ Municipal level elections are synchronised with provincial elections, which can be considered 'third-order' elections.

due to electoral reforms adopted separately across regions, voting and seat distribution processes remain highly similar: they are based on a proportional system with semi-open lists².

In the years and months before the 2018 local elections, Belgian municipalities, spread over the regions, have been plagued with several *affairs*. Among these affairs, three scandals in particular gained a lot of media attention: *Publifin* in Wallonia, *Publipart* in Flanders, and *Samusocial* in Brussels. The *Publifin* scandal results from the disclosure that representatives from the local and provincial levels in Wallonia received excessive indemnities³ in the form of tokens of presence even though they didn't attend physically the meetings of a public intermunicipal company. In addition, the nature and purpose of these meetings have been questioned as it appears that they were mainly used to design commercial strategies and not as spaces for debate and dialogue for the public authorities. Consequently, the involved politicians were seen as using their public mandate to perceive undue and excessive payments. Similarly, the *Publipart* scandal emerged after the revelation that excessive indemnities were allegedly paid to public agents to attend meetings of the *Publipart* company, a subsidiary of an intermunicipal company. The involvement of the *Publipart* company in controversial sectors such as chemical weapons has also generated public debate. *Samusocial* is a non-profit organization that provides support to the homeless on the territory of the Brussels-Capital Region. The scandal involved the Mayor and the President of the CPAS⁴

² Since 2018, the Walloon local elections lean towards a fully open-list system (Dodeigne et al. 2020a).

³ According to the press magazine *Le Vif/L'Express*, which publicized the scandal in December 2016, the remuneration per hour for these meetings is estimated between 3.960 and 30.180 euros.

⁴ Each municipality in Belgium has its own CPAS. The body is in charge of social affairs and policies at the local level. The President of the CPAS is a member of the municipal government.

(*Centre public d'action sociale*) of the Brussels city. Both were members of the *Samusocial* board of directors and were accused to have perceived attendance fees and salaries that were not linked to their actual participation in meetings. The contrast between the social objectives of the association and the remuneration received by these two representatives caused a great indignation among public opinion and led to the Mayor's resignation in June 2017.

The disclosure of these scandals brought to light a lot of new scandals in a broad range of municipalities and intermunicipal networks. In general, these affairs involved prominent local personalities mostly from the traditional 'pillar' parties (Socialists, Liberals and Christian-democrats), as well as from the ethno-regionalist party N-VA. These affairs resulted in political resignations, the break-up of the regional government majority in Wallonia in summer 2017, and reform propositions towards a 'better governance' across the regions (Reuchamps et al. 2020).

Non-traditional party families made remarkable breakthrough at the subsequent local elections, with different trends in the three regions: the radical left (PTB – *Parti du Travail de Belgique*) and the Greens increased significantly their scores in Wallonia and Brussels, while the radical right (VB - *Vlaams Belang*) performed well in Flanders. These voting choices were somehow correlated with low levels of trust (see Close et al. 2020). The question remains, however, whether the affairs directly affected voters' levels of trust.

3.2. The 2018 Belgian exit poll survey

We use data from the 2018 Belgian exit poll survey conducted by an inter-university consortium. The dataset gathers a representative sample of 3.978 electors from 45 municipalities across the three regions (Dandoy et al. 2020). 38 Belgian municipalities were randomly selected based on the main Belgian socio-economic clusters (Dassonneville et al. 2013). In addition, 7 municipalities were added to specifically increase the variance of municipalities' characteristics in terms of demographic size, level of urbanization, party systems and municipalities that were hit by a political scandal. The number of polling stations as well as the number of pollsters assigned in each municipality were related to their demographic size (from one to six teams of two pollsters). In total, 228 pollsters were present from the opening to the closing of the stations. Pollsters were trained two weeks before the survey and were equipped with tablets to collect data. The face-to-face questionnaire covered items about electors' voting behavior, political attitudes, political preferences as well as various sociodemographic characteristics. Pollsters had the instruction to ask every fifth voter to participate when they were leaving the polling station to entrench random selection of participants. Overall, the response rate was 43,6% with some differences observed across regions (Brussels, 50,5%, Wallonia 49,4%, and Flanders 39,3%). Variation across regions is mostly explained by the greater proportion of semi-urban municipalities in Flanders, which presented the lowest response rate vis-à-vis rural and urban municipalities (i.e. difference of respectively 11,8% and 13,2%, see Dandoy et al. 2020). Differences between men and women are, however, marginal (respectively 50,7% and 49,3%).

3.3. Measuring trust

Voters' political trust is measured by asking the respondents to indicate on an 11-point scale (0-10, 0 indicating no trust at all and 10 high trust) to what extent they trusted the federal government, the regional government, the local government and the mayor (Table 1).

Table 1. Trust in government – Summary statistics

	Mean	Standard deviation	N
Trust in federal government	4.69	2.42	2993
Trust in regional government	5.02	2.26	2856
Trust in municipal government	6.03	2.33	2910
Trust in mayor	5.78	2.83	2908

Table 1 shows that voters' trust in government increases according to the government's spatial proximity. In other words, voters generally have most confidence in the local government and the least confidence in the federal government. This conclusion is in line with the results of previous national and international studies on trust in government (Bouckaert et al. 2004; Van Roosbroek 2006). At the local level, trust in the mayor is relatively high, but slightly lower than trust in the municipal government as a whole. In addition, trust in the mayor shows the greatest variance (2.8): it might highly vary depending on the personality of the individuals, as well as depending on the municipal context⁵.

3.4. Identifying 'scandal' municipalities

Media coverage is the primary source of information about political malpractice. Hence, we performed a media analysis to identify municipalities within the sample that were hit by a local

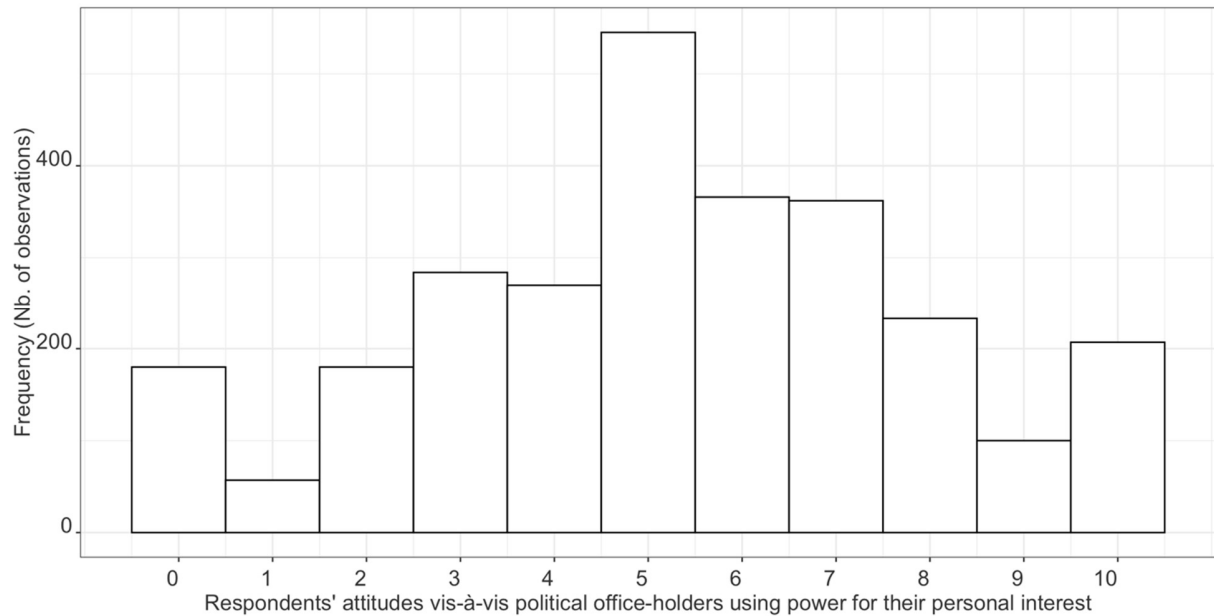
⁵ It might be argued that this greater variance for trust in Mayors might be partly by additional external political factors associated with the Mayoral figure, such as his/her party brand and political ideological. Therefore, we run additional robustness checks control for the Mayor's party brand (see below section 4).

scandal. We used ‘Go Press Academic’ as the main source of media coverage. Relying on Thompson (2000) and Allern and Sikoski (2018), we consider the publicization of a political scandal as inherent to its definition. In order to take into account the framing of norm violations as scandalous by news media, we used the name of the municipality and the term ‘scandal’ as search terms, sometimes supplemented with ‘mayor’ or ‘alderman’ in order not to miss any scandals. Nine out of the 45 municipalities in our sample were hit by a scandal involving one or more local politicians (see table A in Appendix).

3.5. Individual-level variables

In the individual-level analysis, we test the impact of respondents’ perception of local politicians on ‘trustworthiness’. We use the following statement, for which respondents were asked to tell how much they agreed or disagreed, on a scale from 0 (fully disagree) to 10 (fully agree): ‘Local politicians in my municipality use their power to serve their personal interests’. On Figure 1, we observe that respondents consider on average that local politicians are situated on the median position on the scale (median= 5.0, mean=5.26). Moreover, 50 percent of the respondents are covered between scores higher to 3 and lower to 7. On the other extreme sides, we observe a split in the population regarding local politicians’ trustworthiness: 25 percent of the population give a score equal to or below 3 and 25 percent of the population give a score equal or above 7. All in all, this indicates that there is a substantial variance amongst the respondents on the question of local politicians’ trustworthiness.

Figure 1. Distribution of respondents’ attitudes of local politicians’ trustworthiness



3.6. Control variables

Among the sociodemographic control variables, we include gender (female or male), age, education (five categories, from ‘no or primary education’ to ‘university degree’), and immigrant origin. In terms of attitudes, we control for the respondents’ satisfaction with the way democracy functions in their municipality (0-10 scale) and self-placement on the left-right ideological scale (0 ‘left’ to 10 ‘right’). We also control for voting behavior by including a dummy variable recording the vote for a protest party. The latter category includes parties from the radical left (*PTB-PVDA* and *Lutte Ouvrière*), right-wing populism and extreme right (*Parti Populaire*, *La Droite*, *NWA-NATION*, *Vlaams Belang*, and *Agir*), the conservative Muslim party in Brussels (*Islam*) and blank votes. Finally, we take into account the profile of the municipalities in terms of degree of urbanization (Eurostat’s classification) as it can have an influence on local politics (Dodeigne et al. 2020b), and we control for regions (Brussels, Flanders and Wallonia).

4. Analyzing the ‘scandal’ effect

4.1. Comparing trust across scandal and non-scandal municipalities

Table 2 compares average levels of trust between respondents living in a scandal municipality and respondents from non-scandal municipalities in 2018.

Table 2. Trust in government across scandal and non-scandal municipalities in 2018-
Comparisons of means (ANOVA)

	Scandal in municipality		Differential	Sig.
	No	Yes		
Trust in mayor	6.13	5.02	-1.11	***
Trust in municipal government	6.35	5.32	-1.03	***
Trust in regional government	5.12	4.81	-0.31	**
Trust in federal government	4.9	4.26	-0.64	***

*** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05, (+) p < 0.1

Overall, these findings are in line with our hypotheses. First, we see that levels of trust in all governments are lower when a scandal occurs in the municipality, providing empirical support of **H.1. Based** on these descriptive statistics, H.2 is also verified: local scandals seem to have the largest impact on trust in local government. Trust in the mayor seems to be the most affected when a scandal occurs in the municipality. Trust in the municipal government is the second most affected when the scandal occurs in the municipality. The differential is quite sizeable between scandal and non-scandal municipalities: on average, trust in both the mayor and the local government is one point lower among respondents from scandal municipalities. Nevertheless, both in scandal and

non-scandal municipalities, levels of trust in local institutions are still higher than in the regional and federal government.

Trust in the regional government seems to be the least affected by the scandals. This is somewhat surprising since several members of the regional parliaments were involved in the local scandals (for instance, in the *Publifin* scandal). This could be explained, at least in Wallonia, by the break-up of the regional government majority following the scandal, and the communication over this break-up as a political action aiming at excluding the party that was described as the most ‘corrupt’ and the most ‘responsible’ for the scandals (i.e. the Socialist Party). All three regions as well publicized their willingness to reform the system towards a ‘better governance’, which may have led citizens to better evaluate that level of power. We can hypothesize that the assimilation effect (Schwarz and Bless, 1992) is somehow counterbalanced by the *perceived* performance of the regional government in reacting to the scandals. Overall, these differences in levels of trust tend to confirm the evaluative nature of trust (Fisher et al. 2010) and the sophistication of voters (van Elsas et al. 2020).

Nevertheless, these differences do not reflect a longitudinal trend, but are rather cross-sectional. Another way to examine the impact of scandal on trust would be to look at variations of trust before and after the occurrence of a scandal. This is quite challenging, as we cannot predict the occurrence of a scandal. What we can do, however, is to use the data that were collected during the 2012 Exit Poll Survey⁶. Interestingly, the selection of municipalities in the 2012 survey is quite similar, although not identical, to that in the 2018 one: among the 45 municipalities of the 2018 Exit Poll

⁶ The 2012 Exit Poll Survey was organized in very similar fashion as the 2018 one.

Survey, 34 were surveyed in 2012 (for a total of 40 municipalities). Among these 34 municipalities, 8 have faced a scandal during the legislature. The measures of political trust do vary slightly, but we can compare trust in at least three institutions: the mayor, the local government and the federal government. When we examine differences of trust in scandal and non-scandal municipalities between 2012 and 2018, we see that in scandal municipalities, aggregate levels of trust in the mayor as well as in the federal government significantly decrease between 2012 and 2018, whereas no significant differences are found for trust in the local government. In non-scandal municipalities, aggregate levels of trust in the local government significantly increased, while trust in the mayor remained stable, and trust in the federal government also decreased. Unfortunately, we cannot provide more in-depth longitudinal analyses at the individual level, since the data were not collected according to a panel survey design.

4.2. Multivariate analysis

The multivariate linear regression models presented below (Table 3) help to uncover the determinants of individual level variations of trust in the local government and in the mayor. The Table presents three models for each. Given the nested structured of the dataset (respondents are nested in the 45 municipalities covered by our sample), we specify *multilevel* models with a varying intercept (i.e. the average trust across municipalities). The first model examines the impact of a local scandal and of the evaluation of local politicians' trustworthiness, while controlling for socio-demographics, left-right self-placement and the municipality's characteristics (including the region in which the municipality is located). The second model proceeds similarly, while also controlling for satisfaction with democracy and protest voting, which both relate significantly with trust. The

third model finally includes the interactive effect between voters' trustworthiness in local politicians and the occurrence of a scandal in the municipality. This interactive term allows testing how scandal effect depends on individuals' perceptions of local politicians on trustworthiness. Note that in Appendix, we present similar models for trust in the federal government and trust in the regional government (see Table B).

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Trust in government}_{ij} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Gender}_{ij} + \beta_2 \text{Education}_{ij} + \beta_3 \text{Age}_{ij} + \beta_4 \text{Immigrant origin}_{ij} \\ & + \beta_5 \text{Left-right self-place}_{ij} + \beta_6 \text{Vote for protest party}_{ij} + \beta_7 \text{Satisfaction} \\ & \text{with democracy}_{ij} + \beta_8 \text{Politicians' trustworthiness}_{ij} + \beta_9 \text{Scandal in the} \\ & \text{municipality}_{ij} + \beta_{10} \text{Politicians' trustworthiness}_{ij} * \text{Scandal in the} \\ & \text{municipality}_{ij} + \beta_{11} \text{Region}_j + \beta_{12} \text{Municipality's degree of urbanization}_j + \\ & \varepsilon_{ij} + \mu_j \end{aligned}$$

Table 3. The determinants of trust in local government and mayor - Multilevel linear regression models

[illegible]

Wallonia	-0.62*** (0.11)	-0.42*** (0.09)	-0.42*** (0.09)	-0.43** (0.17)	-0.15 (0.13)	-0.15 (0.13)
Brussels	-0.10 (0.16)	-0.10 (0.13)	-0.10 (0.13)	-0.17 (0.27)	-0.10 (0.21)	-0.12 (0.21)
Perception of local politicians' trustworthiness	-0.31*** (0.02)	-0.16*** (0.01)	-0.15*** (0.02)	-0.35*** (0.02)	-0.18*** (0.02)	-0.17*** (0.02)
Scandal in municipality	-0.57*** (0.12)	-0.23** (0.10)	-0.11 (0.18)	-0.82*** (0.19)	-0.52*** (0.15)	-0.24 (0.26)
Local politicians' trustworthiness X Scandal			-0.02 (0.03)			-0.05 (0.04)
Constant	7.53*** (0.32)	3.20*** (0.29)	3.16*** (0.29)	8.04*** (0.40)	3.28*** (0.39)	3.20*** (0.39)
N (level I)	2,362	2,298	2,298	2,356	2,290	2,290
N (level II)	45	45	45	45	45	45
Log Likelihood	-5,100.58	-4,435.21	-4,434.90	-5,590.49	-5,053.62	-5,052.70
Akaike Inf. Crit.	10,241.16	8,914.41	8,915.79	11,220.99	10,151.24	10,151.39
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	10,356.50	9,040.69	9,047.81	11,336.28	10,277.44	10,283.33

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Firstly, the occurrence of a scandal in the municipality significantly decreases both trust in the local government and trust in the mayor⁷. In Table 3, the coefficient for the scandal effect is slightly greater for trust in the mayor than for trust in the local government, which is in line with the trends uncovered at the aggregate level. In Table B (see appendix), a scandal has no significant effect on trust in the federal and regional governments (model 1) and can even show a positive effect once all the control variables are included. These findings tend to suggest that respondents perceive their local representatives (and especially, their mayor) to be involved in the scandal and grant them the responsibility for the affairs that occurred during their mandate. They could be related to the *attribution* theory (Weiner 1985; von Sikorski et al. 2020), as voters may attribute the responsibility for politicians' misbehavior to the politician in 'control' of the municipality, i.e. the mayor.

⁷ We furthermore run additional robustness checks controlling for the Mayor's party brand. The betta coefficient for our three main covariates of interests (scandal in the municipality, voters' attitudes *vis-à-vis* politicians trustworthiness and the interactive effect between the two) are hardly altered while they present highly similar statistical significance levels.

Regarding the control variables, Table 3 shows that few ‘usual suspects’ related to respondents’ sociodemographic profile seem to affect trust in the mayor, by contrast to the other institutions, thereby suggesting other types of explanations.

Secondly, a negative perception of local politicians’ trustworthiness (that is, a high score on the item) significantly - and to a similar extent - decreases trust in both the local government and in the mayor (H.3 verified). Hence distrust of these institutions and actors seems to take roots in a negative evaluation of them. This evaluation of local politicians, again, has a lower effect on trust in federal and regional government (see Table B in Appendix).

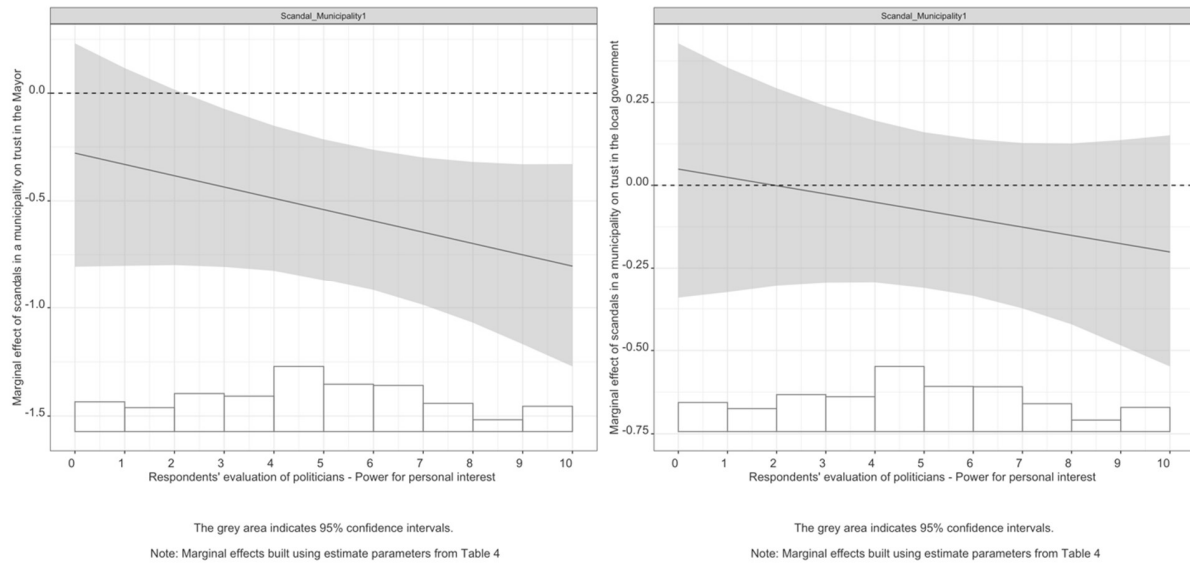
The substantial interpretation of the effect of the interaction terms is best presented through marginal effects. Figure 2 presents how the effect of the variable ‘scandal in a municipality’ varies according to the respondents’ position on the 0-10 trustworthiness scale. Figure A in Appendix proceeds similarly for trust in the regional and federal governments. The histograms at the bottom of the figures display the distribution of politicians’ trustworthiness along the x-axis. The dotted line represents the null effect of the variable ‘scandal in the municipality’: below the line means negative effects, above the line means positive effects. The grey areas cover the 90% confidence intervals. Note that the effect of the interactive term is not significant in the models examining trust in local government and mayor, but well in the regional and federal governments⁸.

⁸ As stated by Brambor et al. (2006), it is possible to observe statistical marginal effects to be different for substantively relevant values of the interactive variable but not for others.

Figure 2 suggests that municipality scandals have no significant effect on voters with positive attitudes vis-à-vis politicians' trustworthiness (low scores on the item), as shown by the confidence intervals crossing the null effect represented by the dotted line. The effect appears more significant (and negative) among respondents who evaluate quite negatively the local politicians. Hence, among voters who believe politicians are trustworthy (i.e. closer to 0 on the scale), a scandal in a municipality does not significantly affect their trust in local institutions. By contrast, among voters who tend to perceive politicians as self-interested, a scandal in a municipality will increase, and in a sense confirm, their distrust towards their local institutions (H4b). In this way, the findings are quite in line with Dancey (2012) and Lee (2018): the negative effect of a local scandal on citizens' trust in local government and in the mayor is stronger among the most 'cynical' respondents. The slope also suggests a greater effect on trust in the mayor than on trust in the local government, hence suggesting that respondents tend to attribute a bit more the responsibility of the scandal to the chief of the local executive, in a sort of *personalization* mechanism (Lobo and Curtice 2014).

Interestingly, when looking at the Figure A in the appendix, a reverse dynamic seems at play for trust in upper-level governments (H4a): the occurrence of a scandal in a municipality significantly and positively affects trust in federal and regional government among respondents who hold a quite positive opinion towards their local politicians but has no significant effect among those perceiving politicians very negatively. In other words, it seems that upper tiers of government become 'safe haven' for respondents when scandals take place at lower tiers. Hence, these findings tend to suggest a *contrast* effect rather than a *spill-over* one (Schwarz and Bless 1992).

Figure 2. Effects of scandals on trust in the mayor (left) and in the local government (right), according to respondents' attitudes about politicians' use of power for their personal interests



Conclusion

Political scandals shed light on misgovernment practices and negatively impact the perceptions that citizens develop towards their elected representatives and institutions. Starting from this widespread assumption, this article analyzed the influence of local scandals on political trust in Belgium in general and on trust in local government and the mayor in particular. Using survey data collected during the 2018 local elections allowing within and between municipalities comparison, our findings provide evidence that local scandals matter. Overall, voters' trust in local political institutions not only reflects national trends, but also exhibits unique dynamics explained by specific factors related to subnational politics (Wolak and Kelleher 2010).

More specifically, this paper provides compelling evidence that local scandals negatively affect trust in local government and the mayor, both at the aggregate and the individual level. Confirming the work of Schwarz and Bless (1992), Lee (2018) and von Sikorski et al. (2020), we find that local scandals not only harm voters' trust in the individual politicians directly involved in the scandal,

but that their impact also ‘spills over’ to a larger pool of politicians (i.e. the government and the mayor). In addition, a *personalization mechanism* (Lobo and Curtice 2014) seems to be at play, with trust in the mayor to be more strongly affected by scandals than trust in local government in general.

This study adds to the literature by investigating the impact of voters’ existing perceptions and ideas concerning (local) politicians. The explanatory analyses show that voters’ *a priori* evaluation of local politicians mediates the negative effect scandals have on political trust. Local scandals do not significantly affect trust in local government among respondents showing positive or neutral evaluations of local politicians. By contrast - and in line with the findings of Dancey (2012) and Lee (2018) - a scandal in a municipality increases distrust towards local institutions among voters who tend to perceive politicians as self-interested.

The exit-poll results further confirm that voters are able to differentiate between (politicians at) different levels of government when making trust evaluations (Fisher et al. 2010). The impact of local scandals differs according to the level of government. First, local scandals have no negative significant effect on trust in the upper levels of government. Hence, respondents seem to hold local representatives responsible for affairs and scandals that occurred during their mandate. This could be related to the *attribution* theory (Weiner 1985; von Sikorski et al. 2020).

Second, at the individual level, a scandal in a municipality positively affects trust in federal and regional government among respondents who hold a quite positive opinion towards their local politicians but has no significant effect among those perceiving politicians negatively. In other words, upper tiers of government seem to become ‘safe haven’ for respondents when scandals take

place at lower tiers. Hence, these findings tend to suggest a *contrast* effect rather than a spill-over one between the different levels of government (Schwarz and Bless 1992).

By identifying multiple factors related to trust in local government, this paper is relevant for practitioners as well. More specifically, the results confirm the importance of integrity and ethical behavior on the part of politicians when explaining the impact of local scandals on trust. Despite these interesting findings, our study shows important limitations. In order to fully test the *causality* between scandal and trust, a longitudinal design would better suit. Ideally, we should have measured trust at the individual level before and after the scandal was revealed, through panel data. That would also have allowed to measure individuals' perception of local politicians' trustworthiness before the occurrence of a scandal. This would be an interesting research endeavor for future research, although quite challenging given the impossibility to predict when and where scandals will occur. In addition, the 'one-shot' design of the survey does not allow us to evaluate the potential long-term effect of scandals and the persistence of negative attitudes towards politics and institutions. Besides, could this trend be reversible – in other words, can confidence in government be regained? How, and how long would it take to 'cure' the malaise? While empirical studies tend to show that politicians' wrongdoings seem to deepen the gap between elites and citizens, we also have lacking evidence on how trust can be 'regained', for instance through more ethical behavior on the part of the political elites.

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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Appendix

Table A. Local scandals across municipalities

Municipalities	Scandal in the municipality = 1	Scandal in a neighboring municipality = 1
Aarschot	1	0
Antwerpen	1	1
Anzegem	0	0
Beringen	0	1
Berlare	0	0
Bredene	0	1
Bruxelles-Ville	1	0
Charleroi	1	1
Deinze	0	0
Dilbeek	0	1
Dinant	0	0
Doische	0	0
Dour	0	0
Eeklo	0	0
Heers	0	0
Héron	0	0
Herstal	1	1
Heuvelland	0	0
Jette	0	1
Koekelare	0	1
Kortenberg	0	0
La Louvière	0	0
Liège	1	1
Lochristi	0	1
Mechelen	0	0
Molenbeek-Saint-Jean	0	1
Musson	0	0
Nivelles	0	0
Pepinster	0	1
Rebecq	1	1
Saint-Josse-Ten- Noode	0	1
Saint-Nicolas	1	1
Schilde	0	1
Sint-Niklaas	0	0
Tessenderlo	0	0

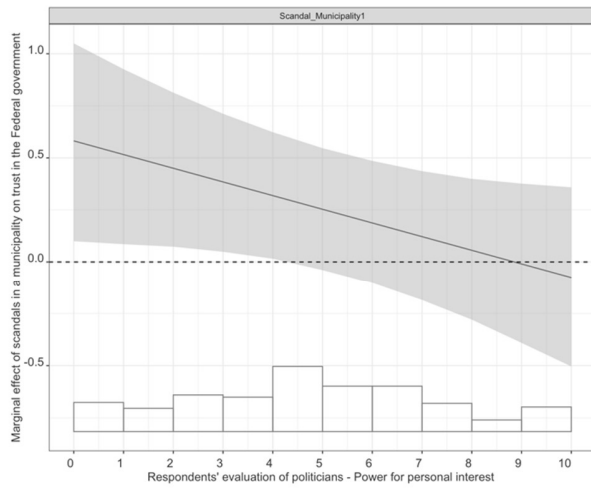
Tielt	0	0
Tongeren	0	0
Torhout	0	0
Tubize	0	0
Vaux-sur-Sûre	0	0
Verviers	1	1
Vleteren	0	0
Willebroek	0	0
Yvoir	0	0
Zaventem	0	1

Table B. The determinants of trust in federal and regional government - Multilevel linear regression models

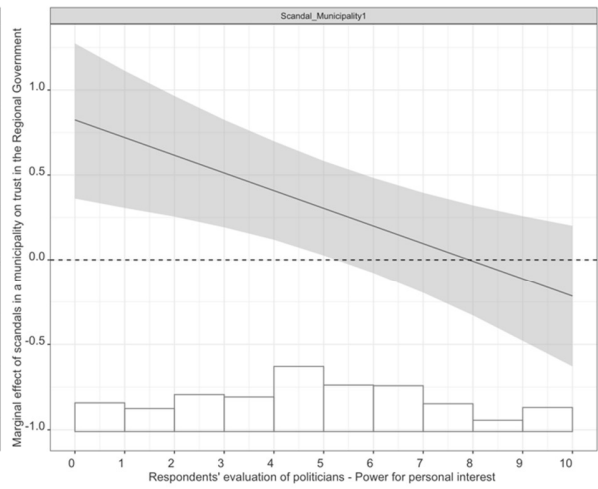
	Trust in federal government			Trust in regional government		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(1)	(2)	(3)
Gender: women	0.19** (0.09)	0.18** (0.09)	0.19** (0.09)	0.05 (0.09)	0.06 (0.08)	0.06 (0.08)
<i>Education (ref. cat: non/primary)</i>						
Lower secondary	0.38 (0.28)	0.43 (0.27)	0.44 (0.27)	0.48* (0.27)	0.52** (0.26)	0.54** (0.26)
Higher secondary I	0.67*** (0.25)	0.60** (0.25)	0.62** (0.25)	0.67*** (0.25)	0.56** (0.24)	0.59** (0.24)
Higher non-university	1.12*** (0.26)	0.98*** (0.25)	0.99*** (0.25)	1.12*** (0.25)	0.94*** (0.24)	0.97*** (0.24)
University	1.25*** (0.26)	1.15*** (0.25)	1.17*** (0.25)	1.11*** (0.25)	0.97*** (0.24)	1.00*** (0.24)
<i>Age (ref. cat. = 45-54)</i>						
18-34	0.20 (0.13)	0.25** (0.13)	0.26** (0.13)	0.28** (0.13)	0.34*** (0.12)	0.34*** (0.12)
35-44	0.02 (0.15)	0.01 (0.15)	0.01 (0.15)	0.33** (0.15)	0.34** (0.14)	0.35** (0.14)
55-64	-0.01 (0.15)	0.02 (0.15)	0.03 (0.15)	0.23 (0.15)	0.27* (0.14)	0.27** (0.14)
65+	0.08 (0.16)	0.12 (0.16)	0.13 (0.16)	0.26* (0.16)	0.28* (0.15)	0.30** (0.15)
Non-Belgian	0.13 (0.11)	0.19* (0.11)	0.20* (0.11)	0.07 (0.11)	0.14 (0.10)	0.14 (0.10)

Left-right position	0.20*** (0.02)	0.19*** (0.02)	0.19*** (0.02)	0.08*** (0.02)	0.07*** (0.02)	0.07*** (0.02)
Vote for a protest party		-0.41*** (0.14)	-0.40*** (0.14)		-0.46*** (0.13)	-0.44*** (0.13)
Satisfaction with democracy at the local level		0.29*** (0.02)	0.29*** (0.02)		0.34*** (0.02)	0.34*** (0.02)
<i>Degree of urbanization (ref. cat. = rural municipalities)</i>						
Semi-urban municipalities	0.18 (0.15)	0.23* (0.14)	0.23 (0.14)	0.08 (0.14)	0.17 (0.13)	0.16 (0.13)
Urban municipalities	-0.25 (0.18)	-0.09 (0.17)	-0.10 (0.17)	-0.31* (0.18)	-0.15 (0.17)	-0.16 (0.17)
<i>Region (ref. cat. = Flanders)</i>						
Wallonia	-1.04*** (0.12)	-0.95*** (0.11)	-0.95*** (0.11)	-0.65*** (0.11)	-0.54*** (0.11)	-0.54*** (0.11)
Brussels	-0.25 (0.17)	-0.30* (0.16)	-0.31* (0.16)	0.02 (0.17)	-0.01 (0.16)	-0.02 (0.16)
Perception of local politicians' trustworthiness	-0.15*** (0.02)	-0.07*** (0.02)	-0.04** (0.02)	-0.14*** (0.02)	-0.04** (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)
Scandal in municipality	0.17 (0.12)	0.30** (0.12)	0.66*** (0.23)	0.18 (0.12)	0.35*** (0.11)	0.92*** (0.22)
Perception of local politicians' trustworthiness X Scandal			-0.07* (0.04)			-0.10*** (0.03)
Constant	3.82*** (0.33)	1.59*** (0.36)	1.46*** (0.36)	4.54*** (0.32)	1.96*** (0.34)	1.78*** (0.35)
Observations	2,409	2,338	2,338	2,358	2,287	2,287
Log Likelihood	-5,318.71	-5,039.24	-5,037.49	-5,132.42	-4,796.61	-4,792.02
Akaike Inf. Crit.	10,677.41	10,122.47	10,120.98	10,304.84	9,637.22	9,630.04
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	10,793.15	10,249.13	10,253.40	10,420.15	9,763.39	9,761.94
<i>Note:</i> * p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01						

Figure A. Effect of scandal on trust in the federal (left) and in the regional government (right), according to respondents' attitudes about politicians' use of power for their personal interests



The grey area indicates 95% confidence intervals.
 Note: Marginal effects built using estimate parameters from Table 4



The grey area indicates 95% confidence intervals.
 Note: Marginal effects built using estimate parameters from Table 4