

# It is not me, it's you: Discourses of (dis) trust among Chilean Congresspeople

*No eres tú, soy yo: Discursos de (des)confianza en el Congreso chileno*

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## Abstract

As in other Latin American countries, institutional trust in Chile has been sharply declining in the last 20 years, especially in the case of state and non-state political institutions that are key to sustaining democracy. Explanations of this trust crisis have focused mostly on social, political and economic factors. This paper, however, addresses the phenomenon from the institution's perspective, tapping into the narratives, conceptualizations, and thoughts of its protagonists, and relies on a case study of the Chilean Congress, the institution with the lowest trust in the South American country. Based on 15 in-depth interviews with deputies and senators, we explore the main discourses of members of Congress regarding the causes and dynamics of the institutional trust crisis they face. Findings show that these politicians downplay the scope and magnitude of a crisis they consider it is not their responsibility to solve. Instead, they blame, among others, the media for what they perceive as unfair coverage, which they argue has deteriorated public opinion about members of Congress.

**Keywords:** Political trust, Chilean Congress, Political discourses, Corruption scandals, Trustworthiness attributes

## Resumen

Al igual que en otros países de América Latina, la confianza institucional en Chile ha disminuido drásticamente en los últimos 20 años, sobre todo en instituciones estatales y no estatales que son fundamentales para sostener la democracia. Las explicaciones de esta crisis de confianza se han centrado principalmente en factores sociales, políticos y económicos. Sin embargo, este artículo aborda el fenómeno desde una perspectiva interna institucional, explorando las narrativas, conceptualizaciones y pensamientos de sus protagonistas. Se basa en un estudio de caso del Congreso chileno, institución con los niveles de confianza más bajos en el país. A partir de 15 entrevistas en profundidad con diputados y senadores, se analizan los principales discursos de los congresistas sobre las causas y dinámicas de la crisis de confianza institucional que enfrentan. Los hallazgos muestran que los políticos minimizan el alcance y la magnitud de una crisis que consideran que no es su responsabilidad resolver. En su lugar, culpan, entre otros, a los medios de comunicación por lo que perciben como una cobertura injusta, que argumentan ha deteriorado la opinión pública sobre los miembros del Congreso.

**Palabras claves:** Confianza política, Congreso chileno, Discursos Políticos, Escándalos de corrupción, Atributos de confiabilidad

## 1. Introduction

Institutional trust in Latin America in general, and in Chile in particular, has suffered a sharp decline over the last decades (Labarca *et al.*, 2022; Gamboa & Segovia, 2016; Mattes & Moreno, 2018), with the Chilean Congress as one of the worst evaluated institutions. Previous research has tried to explain this crisis of institutional trust by considering political, economic, and socio-cultural variables. These include political disaffection (Newton 2001a), affective polarization (Segovia, 2022), political attitudes (Catterberg & Moreno, 2006), lack of satisfaction with the state of the economy (Mattes & Moreno, 2018), news exposure (Labarca, *et al.*, 2022; Patterson, 2009), and sociodemographic characteristics (Brezzi *et al.*, 2021; Zhao & Hu, 2017), among others. A common thread in such research is that institutional trust is built by individual evaluations of institutional performance related to expectations about their actual behavior (Quilter-Pinner *et al.*, 2021).

In general, the crisis of institutional trust has been linked to multiple challenges affecting the institutional infrastructure of democracy, such as the crisis of representation, high rates of electoral volatility, the decline of political parties, and changes in formal political institutions, including the role of institutionalized parties in democratic stability (e.g., Buben & Kouba, 2024; Martínez, 2021; Martínez & Olivares, 2020). Other inquiries into trust have considered the role of political institutions and party systems, social media use, and scandals (e.g., Bargsted *et al.*, 2022; Gamboa & Segovia, 2016; Heiss & Suárez-Cao, 2024; Luna *et al.*, 2022; Segovia & Gamboa, 2024; Toro & Nogueira, 2024). This underscores the fact that the decline of institutional trust should be considered as a multicausal phenomenon, influenced by different individual and macro variables, also related to the context in which it is settled (Brezzi *et al.*, 2021).

To expand on this, we look at the problem from a novel perspective: the discourses of the own members of an institution with a trust crisis—the Chilean Congress—who are supposed to have agency in the matter. We do so in the aftermath of corruption cases widely known as “the irregular financing of politics” that affected the Chilean Congress in 2015, since they represent a turning point in trust toward this institution. The scandals involved two major corporations, Penta and Soquimich, as members of

Congress from a wide range of ideological stances (Zúñiga, 2015), further eroding public trust in the political class. Specifically, it came to light those prominent politicians were linked to the issuance of “ideologically false” invoices for services never rendered, which not only defrauded the Treasury, but were also used to finance political campaigns off the books. Although the scandals were unveiled by alternative media, mainstream media quickly caught on to the issue, which became a prominent and frequent topic in the news agenda (Mascareño, 2019).

We chose this context for various reasons. First, because there is a correlation between the scandals and trust decline in Congress: survey data shows that in November–December 2011, only 12.8 percent of respondents had some or a lot of trust in Congress; by August 2015, right after the first revelation of the illegal financing of campaigns, the number fell to less than half that figure, 6.3 percent (Centro de Estudios Públicos, 2015). Second, it helps to situate the problem at hand in a specific time and contextual frame. Third, because it was an essential antecedent to the October 2019 protests, the most significant crisis in Chile since the return to democracy<sup>1</sup> (Tagle & Claro, 2021). However, no communicational response to the crisis was made by the Congress or any related political actor (Gamboa & Segovia, 2016). Indeed, it was the executive branch—during the administration of then President Michelle Bachelet—that was trying to tackle the issue with a bill to reform the financing of political parties and avoid future corruption cases (Cadiz, December 20, 2014). Although Congress finally passed the bill, this did not translate into Congress showing agency on the matter; on the contrary, it only highlighted its lack of it.

In this exploratory case study, we look at the perception Congress members hold regarding the institutional trust crisis they are facing. For that, we dig into the perspective of men and women from different political parties serving in Congress. Based on in-depth interviews with 15 senators and deputies, we examine what these politicians make of citizens’ perceptions about Congress, how they articulate the role of trust in legislative work, and their strategies to rebuild confidence in the institution they represent.

Exploration of Congress members’ viewpoints allows for a more nuanced analysis of institutional

trust, as it addresses a standpoint that is often difficult to access, but important to understand the phenomenon in its complexity. In so doing, we aim to shed light from a novel perspective to this problem that pervades Latin America, and whose consequences include polarization, governance crisis, and democratic backsliding.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Trust has been defined in multiple ways, but there are some common elements in these definitions (Labarca *et al.*, 2022; Labarca, 2014). First, trust is an expectation of another's future behavior (Gambetta, 1988; Newton, 2001b). As Luhmann (1979) explained, trust is a decision we take in the present but that will be completed in the future (the trustor trusts the trustee *before* the trustee fulfills—or not—the trustor's initial expectations). For example, people trust Congress—or Congresspeople—in the hope they will fulfill expectations regarding their ability to create laws for the good functioning of society. Thirdly, trust is embedded in a relationship, that of a trustor and a trustee (Hardin 2002, 2006; Newton, 2001b), in which one agent takes a risk placing trust in the other.

Although scholars have defined institutional trust in many ways (e.g., Coleman, 1990; Devos *et al.*, 2002; Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016), we will rely on Mattes and Moreno's (2018, p. 367) definition:

the vertical bond of confidence that citizens place in the organizations that make, adjudicate, and enforce the rules that govern society. Trust is a lubricant that creates a source of consent so that democratic governments do not have to obtain constant mandates or resort to coercion to make, implement, and adjudicate their decisions

We use this definition because trust is conceptualized as a *relationship* between two agents in which one holds an expectation over the other, and because trust is defined as a positive factor to enhance and maintain democracy and institutional stability.

Past scholarship has focused on the characteristics of the trustors that make them more willing—or not—to trust others, including psychological propensity to trust, or media influence (Labarca *et*

*al.*, 2022; Heyns & Rothmann, 2015), and the perceived trustworthiness of the trustee (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995), which is the focus of this study. Mayer and colleagues (1995) developed a model in which they measure which attributes of trustworthiness are relevant for the trustor: *competence* covers the perceived ability to perform the task mandated to it; *integrity* relates to the congruence of values between the trustor and the trustee; and *benevolence* refers to the perceived intentions of the trustee. For this case study, this translates into the capacity of Congress to write laws, the core values that it holds, and the degree of “goodness” or benevolence perceived in its actions.

As a relational concept, trust has been shown to be a key in successful organization-public relationships (Fisher & Hopp, 2020; Huang, 2001), with trust in different governmental institutions vital for the success—or failure—of governance (Huang *et al.*, 2020). When it comes to Congress and legislative work, this is also a matter of legitimacy, in the sense of public acceptance (Dudenhausen *et al.*, 2020), something that is difficult to attain since there are many elements involved in evaluating the actions of Congress and its members (Preusse *et al.*, 2013). To be successful, institutions need to cultivate relationships with the public that affect or are affected by their decisions and behaviors (Aldoory & Grunig, 2012). Indeed, past research has shown that trust in an organization or entity is a factor that heuristically informs stakeholders' interpretations of an entity/organization communications, motivations, intentions, and behaviors (Fisher & Hopp, 2020).

Trust may be seriously weakened or even destroyed by an institutional crisis, since institutional actions may be seen as contravening the norms and expectations of its publics, or inconsistent within the organization-public relationship (Falkheimer & Heide, 2015; Fisher & Hopp, 2020). Furthermore, distrust in politicians could also lead to negative institutional trust outcomes (Quilter-Pinner *et al.*, 2021).

Past research has underscored the role of the institutional infrastructure of democratic regimes, and how changing or reforming political institutions is not easy, and it may even negatively affect the quality of democracy (Buben & Kouba, 2024; Martínez, 2021; Toro & Noguera, 2024). That is, Congress and legislative work do not depend only on specific rules and procedures (e.g., ways to present a bill) but also

on the context and conditions in which they operate, affecting their stability and effectiveness (e.g., Bunker & Negretto, 2023; Toro & Noguera, 2024). Importantly, institutional responses to popular demands often come as an attempt to alleviate popular pressures rather than good intentions and may lead to weak or incomplete institutional changes (Buben & Kouba, 2024; Bunker & Negretto, 2023; Toro & Noguera, 2024). Arguably, Chilean Congress members might not have an incentive to tackle the low levels of trust of Congress as a collective organization, since it has shown to be resilient enough, and overall individual deputies and senators show higher trust levels than the institution itself (Martínez & Olivares, 2022; Toro & Noguera, 2024). Further, there is evidence that the Chilean political and social system is no longer articulated through parties (Luna, 2016; Martínez, 2021; Toro & Noguera, 2024), more so when politicians seem unable to reconcile and interpret citizen preferences (Heiss & Suárez, 2024). Indeed, the fragmentation of parties in Chile and their significant dependence on electoral performance has encouraged a sort of individual political entrepreneurship, where politicians are often personalities rather than representatives of their parties, with significant repercussions in the way Congress operates (Toro & Noguera, 2024).

However, it has also been argued that a certain degree of distrust toward political institutions is healthy for democracies (e.g., Hardin 2002, 2004) insofar some skepticism could help to control institutional power and authority, especially in new democracies (Norris, 2011). However, the context of the present study is one of *extremely low* levels of institutional trust: according to the Bicentenario Survey, trust in Congress has ranged from 1 to 4% in the last decade.

There are conceptual differences between trust and distrust, and the terms should not be taken as the two sides of the same continuum, but rather as different variables with separate attitudinal dimensions (Lahusen, 2024). Arguably, distrust has been undertheorized (Bertsou, 2019). Therefore, we tackle the perceptions of trust and distrust from Congress members.

Following Thomas, Abts, Stroeken & Weyden (2015), who highlighted the need for understanding trust as a multidimensional concept, we explore trust and distrust as seen by the trustees, that is, those in

which trust is placed. This allows for a novel perspective to understand (dis)trust as a relational concept. Informed by the theoretical framework and literature review, the overarching research questions guiding this exploratory analysis are the following: How do Congress members understand the meaning and importance of citizens' distrust in the Chilean Congress? And what are the main discourses they articulate when talking about this situation?

### 3. Methods

To answer the research questions, we conducted 15 in-depth interviews in 2020 and 2021 with then sitting members of the Chilean Congress. The sample included men and women from the upper and the lower houses, from different parties, and serving for a first, a second, or a third term. None of them were directly linked to the scandals of irregular funding, as we wanted them to take an organizational perspective rather than a personal one in their responses. Still, their parties had been directly tied to the scandal, and thus the interviewees were indirectly involved. Throughout this paper, and per the signed consent forms, the name and party of each of the subjects have been omitted for confidentiality matters. Rather, when citing each testimony, we use sequential numbers and report the subjects' gender and whether at the time of the interviews they were part of the right-wing government coalition (6 individuals) or the opposition (9 individuals from left-centrists parties and independents).

The leading author conducted and recorded all interviews via an online video-conference platform between August 2020 and January 2021<sup>2</sup>. At the time, the country was facing the sanitary and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the political outcomes of the October 2019 protests that led to a constitutional referendum (held October 25, 2020) and the subsequent set up for a Constitutional Convention.

Interviews lasted about 45 minutes and were transcribed by a research assistant. The conversation tapped into the subjects' perception of trust in political institutions, their explanations of the low levels of trust in Congress, the role of the scandals and media coverage on people's trust in Congress, and their thoughts on how trust could be restored or improved. The questions and consent forms were

reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the authors' university.

The authors read the transcriptions multiple times in an iterative process aimed to identify commonalities and differences, as well as themes and patterns, based on a qualitative open coding approach (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007) using the software Nvivo. In this inductive procedure informed by the literature, we paid attention to what was said and how ideas were articulated. We also aimed to minimize redundancy and develop evidence for the different categories found, and we rely on excerpts from the transcripts to illustrate these categories.

The in-depth interviews allowed us to explore the perceptions that sitting deputies and senators have regarding the narratives associated with the institutional trust crisis they face. Rather than statistical inferences, we were interested in the multiple ways — the *how*, rather than how often— incumbent congress members defined and explained the issue at hand.

## 4. Results

When analyzing the interviewees' discourses on trust and distrust toward Congress and how to deal with it, four main themes emerge inductively. One theme has to do with the subjects' understanding and framing of trust as a concept. Another one is that of a few bad apples affecting the image of Congress as a whole. A third theme frames the media as the main contributors to the crisis of trust in Congress, and the last theme underscores how these trustees show no plans or strategies to make the trustors —the citizens— trust in them again. These themes illustrate the scope of members of Congress' perceptions and narratives about the crisis they are immersed in.

### 4.1 Theme 1: Understanding Trust

When it comes to explaining trust, the interviewees had a hard time elaborating on what trust means or implies. Instead, they defined trust by its causes or effects. In this sense, they tended to elucidate *trustworthiness* rather than trust itself. Based on that, we grouped their thoughts about trust using the concepts of benevolence, integrity and competence (Mayer *et al.*, 1995).

When framing trust (or lack thereof) in Congress as a matter of integrity, subjects recognized this dimension as key insofar as there is a gap between the discourse of the Congress and their actions, which ends up in a lack of credibility:

The conclusion is precisely that, the inconsistency in discourse, along with what needs to be done. The issue of scandals was the straw that broke the camel's back. I believe this [lack of distrust] was underlying. (Respondent 11, man, opposition).

Credibility, then, becomes an essential component of trust, which is seen by most of the respondents as the main problem when it comes to relating to citizens. Based on this perspective, the organizational crisis was always underlying since citizens' lack of trust toward Congress was a fact from before the scandals.

In relation to competence, understood as the capacity of Congress to fulfill citizens' expectations of their own work, interviewees acknowledge two dimensions. First, they described people's expectations about legislative work's attributions and roles as misplaced, mostly because members of Congress themselves have wrongly fueled them. They argue that during campaigns, politicians tend to make promises they cannot fulfill because they are out of the range of their attributions by law. As an example, the mention that candidates to Congress promise they will fix housing problems, when there is no direct influence on that matter. Thus, they fabricate narratives based on expectations they know they will not be able to satisfy.

Second, interviewees highlight their own inability to elaborate laws that benefit citizens' daily life or a tendency to focus on populist laws that may boost short-term individual trust in Congress members, but end up hurting the institution on a long-term basis. That is, they acknowledge citizens' demands, but their response is more impulsive than purposeful. For instance:

But the main issue is the frustration that choosing authorities is not enough to generate changes that are essential for the citizen or the voter. So, frustration arises because the regulatory framework [does not allow changes]... Citizens feel that politics does not affect their



lives, does not change vital aspects of their lives and, therefore, that frustration generates disappointment, disaffection, distance, and a series of sensations in the population that, I believe, hurt politics. (Respondent 8, man, opposition).

Congress distrust and its negative image drives Congresspeople to elaborate proposals that are popular, but not necessarily good for the country. It is a vicious circle, in which individuals want to save themselves rather than protect institutions. (Respondent 4, man, opposition)

Importantly, since political disenfranchisement has been on the rise in Chile and even party finances heavily rely on electoral outcomes, the focus seems to be on being a bankable, recognizable politician, rather than an effective one.

Finally, interviewees highlight perceptions that Congresspeople are privileged and lazy:

Most citizens believe we do not work at all. They believe we make a lot of money but do nothing. (Respondent 12, man, opposition)

Regarding benevolence, interviewees frame citizens' lack of trust toward Congress as the result of a dependency on economic and political powers:

Public opinion believes there is a lack of independence within legislative work because big corporations are financing congresspeople's campaigns. (Respondent 4, man, opposition).

I think distrust is not related to the illegal dimension, it is attached to the relationship between money and politics. [...] I think the problem is that people feel congress people are not representing constituents' interests, but instead, representing only a group. (Respondent 5, man, government coalition)

Lack of trust, then, comes from a perception of malpractice by legislators, who seek their own well-being, rather than the social one, and thus citizens' assessment of Congress' lack of benevolence may be key.

Members of Congress also conceptualize trust and distrust as essential for democracy, or a necessary ideal they need to work for. In line with

Norris (2011), some level of distrust and a critical stance may be a good disposition when it comes to elected officials and their work. Arguably, some distrust is a preferred alternative to blind faith, but it becomes challenging when the default disposition is being cynical rather than critical (Bachmann & Valenzuela, 2023).

## 4.2 Theme 2: Bad apples

Interviewees also acknowledge corruption cases as directly influencing distrust toward politicians in general and Congress members in particular. They also recognize that the illegal financing scandal reinforced prior perceptions that the pursuit of money and power was more relevant to members of Congress than public service or legislation. There is acknowledgement, then, that certain purposive actions directly affect distrust (rather than diminish trust). There is then a differentiation between low levels of trust (due to a trustworthiness perception) and distrust that emerges from negative interactions.

However, all participants insist that corruption is not pervasive and that the actions of a few individuals had "unfair effects" (Respondent 1, woman, government) on the overall image of politicians who are actually honest<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, interviewees tie this phenomenon to a trend of distrust in all institutions in the country. For example:

There are few [cases], some companies, with some politicians that end up doing this [off-the-books donations to political campaigns], and everyone gets hurt. And then, this trust crisis appears, a moral crisis as well. As I already told you, it is a deeper problem. (Respondent 5, man, government).

And also, I believe this is framed within a generalized perception of distrust toward state institutions as well. But yes, this represents a key issue for citizens' distrust toward parliament. (Respondent 2, woman, opposition).

Despite the distinction they made between certain individuals committing corruptive actions, the subjects recognize that there is an institutional setting that allows for distrust to occur. Indeed, the interviewees recognize that distrust is such a generali-

zed phenomenon that even Congress members are distrustful of their peers, and that the same occurs within political parties. This, in turn, weakens collective action and legislative efforts. Politicians thus appear self-serving and trying to “save themselves” (Respondent 3, woman, opposition) by acting on their own rather than collectively or along party lines, mimicking citizens’ perceptions regarding benevolence and integrity as trust attributes. For example, Respondent 4 (man, opposition) explains that this leads to the debilitation of “institutional democracy” and the construction of a “democracy of individuals.” Furthermore:

This sense of belonging; [that means] knowing we belong to a formal institution [despite our legitimate disagreements] and therefore [we belong] to the whole institutional system. A system we need to take care of. And for many years, I have not seen that [concern] in my fellow congresspeople... They shoot against their own institution! Self-sabotage! (Respondent 10, man, opposition).

Thus, in line with evidence showing structural conditions favoring individual members of Congress rather than a collective institution (e.g., Toro & Noguiera, 2024), the current setup ends up affecting the stability and effectiveness of legislative work beyond matters of trust.

### 4.3 Theme 3: A media problem

Congress members interviewed recognize that it is essential that the media disclose and cover ongoing corruption cases. They even say they understand the media’s role in a democratic context, in so much as journalists act as “comptrollers” (Respondent 5, man, government) of political action and as educators who “orient” citizens’ political views. Yet, a recurrent theme in their discourse is that traditional media —largely controlled by elite economic powers— have greatly amplified distrust toward Congress with their coverage.

The interviewees consider that the media covered the scandals “irresponsibly” (Respondent 4, man, opposition), making generalizations of corruption as widespread in Congress (Respondent 5, man, government), and in so doing not helping to “make politics better” (Respondent 8, man, opposition). One

member of Congress even considers that their focus on conflict made the media prone to be part of “political operations” (Respondent 4, man, opposition). Congress members also say that they expected a “responsible” coverage (Respondent 4, man, opposition) that would not only address issues that beget distrust but also events that may help rebuild trust (Respondent 15, man, government), again placing responsibility on external actors without recognizing their own agency in the process. For example:

I think the media played a key role in public opinion’s knowledge [of the irregular financing case]. But, as it usually happens, many people got involved without being properly punished. And the press was very active when people got accused, but not when they were absolved, right? (Respondent 7, man, opposition).

We need to make an effort. We need to communicate all the changes in legislation that we have introduced... regarding how we finance politics [now]. Of course, these episodes [referring to corruption scandals] will continue happening and have always happened. What has changed is that nowadays there is more information, more oversight, which is expected, and this is also good [for society]. (Respondent 15, man, government).

From the interviewees’ perspective, not only does trust repair rely on external stakeholders, who they have limited control over, but these stakeholders actually have the power and ability to rebuild trust after it has been broken. Additionally, understanding that institutional trust can be rebuilt without the participation of the counterpart (the citizens in this case) implies that trust is not seen as a relational concept. Thus, its understanding is limited to the ability of the trustee to adequately shape trustworthiness attributes, ignoring the perception of trustors over those trustees’ attributes. This contravenes abundant literature on trust repair (Sharma *et al.*, 2023; Gillespie *et al.*, 2021), which again sees trust as a relational concept. Although there is no agreement on the scope of trust repair and the level of agency the trustee has over it, there is consensus that rebuilding trust entails at least an active role of those who have broken trust, as well as the perceptions of the trustors.

#### 4.4 Theme 4: No self-criticism and no strategies

The interviewees also agree that there is no institutional effort to rebuild trust in Congress, partly because of a lack of institutional communication. They recognize that they have the means to enact communication actions (for instance, each house has a public television channel, albeit with little impact). Still, they insist they have no information about any concerted communication strategy regarding Congress, let alone one oriented to rebuilding trust (for instance, Respondent 3, woman, opposition; and Respondent 9, woman, government).

They concur that it is not enough to publish information for transparency's sake, that streaming legislative sessions is a weak effort, and that much else needs to be done (for example, Respondent 4, man, opposition, and Respondent 5, man, government). They also perceive a need to explain and contextualize the role of Congress (Respondent 1, woman, government), to explain complex political issues in layman's terms (Respondent 9, woman, government), to counter disinformation with public data (Respondent 6, man, government), to promote informed debate (Respondent 4, man, opposition), and to get to younger audiences (Respondent 9, woman, government). All these ideas are seen as essential strategic actions to rebuild trust in Congress, but there is also agreement that there are no institutional efforts to create strategic narratives to achieve such goals.

Instead, most communicative actions are performed by individual Congress members and revolve around contentious individual projects rather than working on collective, positive ones:

If the attention is placed only on those controversial projects, there is then a controversial audience. Traditional media will always pay more attention to controversial projects. They will report on them anyway. So, I think constituents should focus on those other projects [noncontroversial ones], and seek more participation and information, to improve citizens' quality of life. (Respondent 6, man, government).

Therefore, and despite the lack of agency described earlier, some discourses acknowledge the possibi-

lity of actually intervening in trust repair in a normative way, what "ought to be" or "what we should do", but without really implicating themselves in the process. As such, the interviewees describe the institution as detached from themselves, not considering themselves part of the collective action.

## 5. Conclusion

Look at trust as a relational concept, this study examined the discourses that prevail among members of Congress regarding the trust crisis they currently face. This implies understanding not only citizens' perception regarding this phenomenon (as the literature often does), but the thoughts and opinions of the institutional actors. As Ploeger and Bisel (2013) noted, individuals tend to defend organizational unethical behavior to support organizational goals. Voices within the organization tend to create communicative actions for themselves—and therefore create multiple discourses—that may not contribute to rebuilding trust.

Our findings shed light on how those who exert power—in this case, members of Congress—understand the dynamics of trust-building in a context of a shaky democracy and the slight differentiation they perceive regarding the concept of distrust. One may conclude that trust is not well understood for Congress members beyond the idea of trustworthiness attributes they can (or cannot) handle. Instead, they tend to conceptualize trust through its opposition, *distrust*, which appears to be the result of particular actions (such as corruption or unfulfilled promises) that the public ascribes to the whole institution.

It is not clear whether Congress members understand trust and distrust as different concepts or a continuum. At first glance, it seems they perceive the trust/distrust dyad as being opposite concepts, without nuanced options in between. For the interviewees, distrust is a bad concept, defying the idea that a certain degree of distrust is beneficial for democracy (Norris, 2011).

In Chile, politicians in general—and Congress in particular—have lost the citizenry's trust, reaching high levels of distrust, which is dangerous. But this is not the only problem at hand. The situation is also difficult because, as the discourses analyzed here



reveal, Congress members are not aware that they must do *something* to regain trust. The current situation in Chile shows a profound fracture in trust between the general population and most state institutions, especially those linked to or represent some elite —economic, political, social or media elites— which in Chile are all closely tied.

Faced with this complex situation, our findings show that the narratives of said politicians show a lack of self-criticism about their responsibility in the breakdown of citizen trust. For the interviewees, the loss of prestige of the political class is primarily associated with an “unfair” situation in which “many” have paid the blame for things done by “a few” —those specific individuals identified as directly involved in corruption scandals. However, such discourse shows little reflection on its own deficiencies. The fact that they assign much of the blame for this crisis to the media is a clear indicator of this lack of self-criticism: it serves to highlight that the Chilean political class tends to shift the responsibility for its bad reputation toward others instead of looking for the causes in their own actions. This lack of awareness, and consequent lack of strategy as an institution, observed in the interviews is worrisome. For many interviewees, the main concern was their reputation as a public figure rather than the discrediting of the political system or Congress as an organization, underscoring an institutional incapacity to rebuild trust.

Regarding the perceived trustworthiness attributes, the interviewed members of Congress recognized the three traditional categories proposed by Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995), placing emphasis in competence and benevolence. The narrative regarding the last one, however, is crafted around “othering” the issue, whether they blame some of their fellow Congress members because of corruption actions or transfer responsibilities to third parties to rebuild trust.

As an exploratory case study, there are inherent limitations, and among them, the timeframe of the study is noteworthy. The interviews were conducted in 2020 and 2021, in the aftermath of the October 2019 protests, and before two failed efforts to draft a new constitution. The political climate and context have significantly changed in the past few years, and while trust in congress remains very low, it is not the only institution affected by scandals or that has been linked to the increasing dissatisfaction and apathy of citizens with political affairs. This prevents us from addressing other matters that may be more present in public opinion or media coverage today. Were this study to be repeated in the current context, findings might be very different. In any case, further research is needed to explore other institutions and cases that contribute to institutional trust knowledge.

## Notes

1. A seemingly politically stable nation, in October 2019 massive riots that started in the capital city spread throughout the country as the perception that the “Chilean model” perpetuated all sorts of inequalities reached a boiling point (González & Morán, 2020; Somma *et al.*, 2021). The demonstrations —labeled “estallido social” (social uprising)— heavily threatened the continuity of the government (Labarca & Bachmann, *forthcoming*; González & Morán 2020; Somma *et al.*, 2021).
2. The Chilean Congress seat is in the city of Valparaíso, about 140 km from Santiago, the capital. During the timeframe of the interviews —among restrictions and lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic—Congress was for the most part in session, but inter-city travel was severely restricted for regular citizens. This explains the choice for online interviews, rather than in-person.
3. At the time of the interviews, only a handful of the congressmembers involved in the scandal had been prosecuted and most resolved the issue by means of rectifying their tax records.

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