

Measuring Trust, Mistrust and Distrust

Public Opinion Analytics Lab (POAL) Public Explainer Series

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1 Background:

Jennings et al. [in press] define political trust as a basic evaluative and affective orientation to governing institutions and actors. Trust is characterised as a positive orientation that an institution or actor would produce preferred outcomes even if left unattended and where positive outcomes are uncertain. But the absence of trust can take different forms: mistrust and distrust. These three orientations - trust, mistrust, and distrust - comprise what Jennings et al. [2021] refer to as the political trust family, with their definitions and behavioural consequences provided in Figure 1.

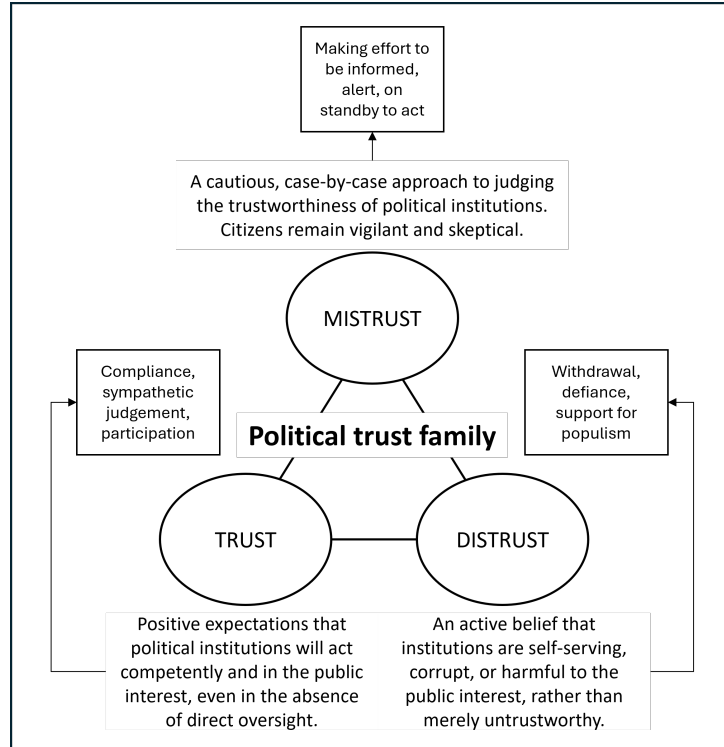


Figure 1: The political trust family

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) view trust as vital for the effectiveness of governments, going as far as to say, “few perceptions are more palpable

than that of trust or its absence”, and that “governments ignore this at their peril” (OECD [2017], p.3). Accordingly, trust-building has been a key strategy of OECD governments over the last decade. Trust is only a part of the piece, however: mistrust and distrust are distinct, and existing measures are less good at identifying these attitudes.

This has important implications for understanding trends and levels of political trust, not least because they each have distinct (and, at times, opposing) behavioural consequences. For example, Jennings et al. [2021] showed that distrust was linked to lower compliance with Covid-19 regulations, while mistrust was linked with greater adherence through behavioural change. Jennings et al. [in press] also show that distrusters are significantly more susceptible to conspiratorial thinking and populist challenge than are mistrusters. This demonstrates the importance of conceptualising and measuring the ‘trust family’ as fine-grained as we can.

2 Key trends:

To address the limitations of existing measures, Will Jennings, Daniel Devine, Viktor Valgarðsson, Jennifer Gaskell, and Gerry Stoker developed and validated an eight-item battery, using focus groups in eight countries, to distinguish between the three orientations of political trust. Latent class analysis (LCA) of responses from 28 surveys across 26 countries over three years supported this classification and identified a fourth group comprising genuinely ambivalent respondents and survey satisficers (see Jennings et al. [in press]). The pattern of responses provided by these four classes across each of the eight items of the original surveys conducted in 13 liberal democracies is presented in Figure 2.

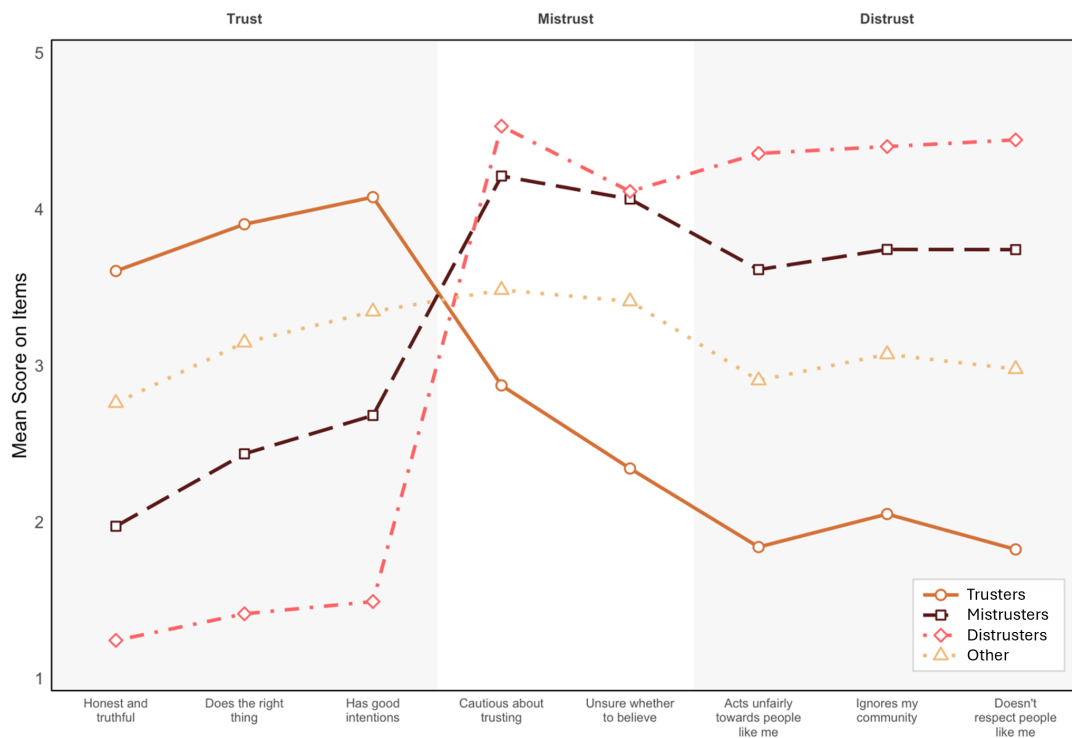


Figure 2: Means on each item for each of four classes identified by LCA

For each item, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed that a given descriptor was representative of their views of the government, using a five-point scale (where 1 = “Strongly Disagree” and 5 = “Strongly Agree”). The descriptors are shown on the x-axis of Figure 2. Taking this further, Figure 3 displays the percentage of respondents categorised within each of the four orientations across these same countries. Sampling weights are applied to correct for the different number of respondents between countries.

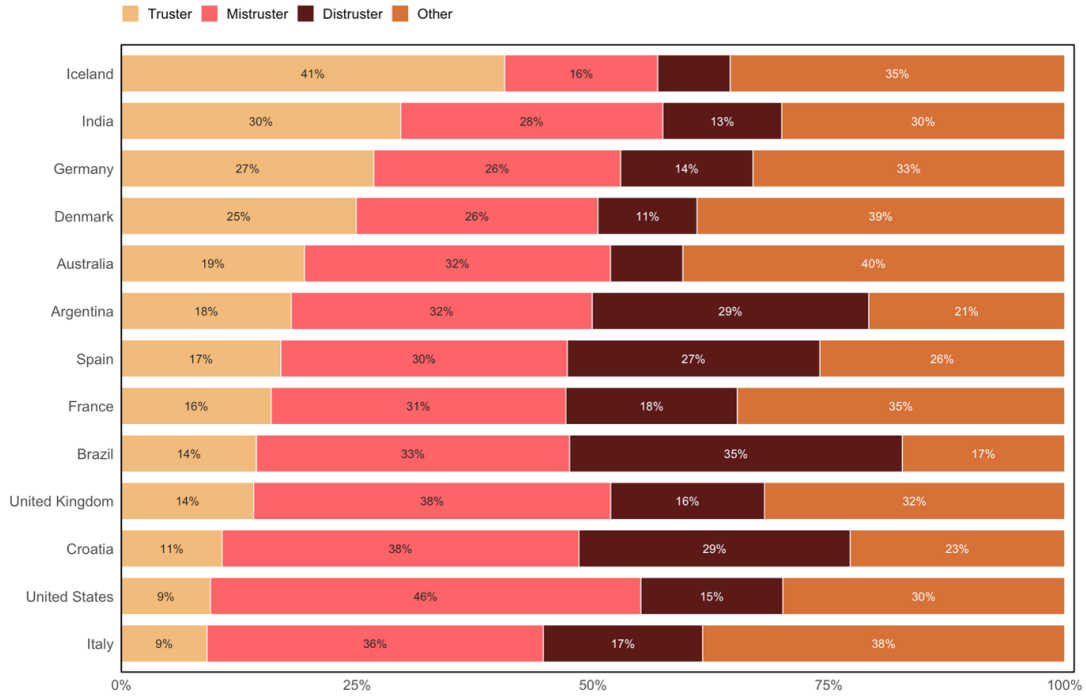


Figure 3: Proportion of respondents in each country that fall within each class

In only 5 of these countries were trusters *not* the smallest group, reinforcing the argument that a lack of trust should perhaps be considered the new normal in democracies. The most prevalent category was mistrusters, although in most cases there was also a substantial proportion of distrusters. Interestingly, the discovered category of no clear position on trust accounted for somewhere between 20 and 40 percent of survey respondents, revealing that, as in many areas of public opinion, there are sections of the population who lack a clear and coherent viewpoint. Future research distinguishing between trust, mistrust, and distrust is encouraged to allow the field to move beyond simplistic interpretations of low or declining trust and its implications and toward a more nuanced and necessarily multi-faceted understanding of political trust.

3 References

Will Jennings, Gerry Stoker, Viktor Valgarðsson, Daniel Devine, and Jennifer Gaskell. How trust, mistrust and distrust shape the governance of the covid-19 crisis. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 28(8):1174–1196, 2021. URL <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2021.1942151>.

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