



TRUEDEM

Trust in European Democracies

**TRUEDEM: Trust in European Democracies
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ON MEASURING TRUST**

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Introduction

Project summary

TRUEDEM is a 3-year multinational research project funded by the Horizon program of the European Commission with several core objectives. TRUEDEM aims to design and implement a complex research effort to collect comprehensive evidence on the perceptions of trust and judgments of trustworthiness in a range of European states. The project will create a robust and comprehensive knowledge base on long-term dynamics and predictors of trust in political institutions of representative democracy (parties, executives, parliaments, judiciary etc.) in the EU. TRUEDEM will examine the role of new patterns of electoral behaviour, impact of socioeconomic transformations, the erosion of old and emergence of new political cleavages for the inclusiveness, representativity and legitimacy in European democracies, and political trust. TRUEDEM will identify strategies to address the demands and needs of citizens expressed via both electoral and non-electoral forms of political participation as means to enhance active engagement and inclusion and thus booster inclusive and responsive decision-making and governance in Europe. TRUEDEM will distinguish clusters of values that can hinder or foster pro-democratic values and attitudes and thus contribute to the barriers and opportunities to re-invigorating and enhancing representative democratic systems. Finally, TRUEDEM will develop a comprehensive and transparent toolbox of policy interventions including recommendations, toolkits and methodologies for enhancing trust in political institutions, boosting transparency inclusiveness of representative systems. TRUEDEM is coordinated in Austria with partners in Czechia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, and Ukraine. The three-year program runs from January 2023 to December 2025.

Report summary

This report provides an up-to-date survey of literature and a comprehensive overview of existing approaches in the social sciences to measuring trust and trustworthiness, including interpersonal and institutional forms of trust.

Part 1 sets out the conceptual framework and unpacks the definitions and approaches in the literature which have developed since the mid-twentieth century across diverse disciplines. It identifies three alternative perspectives, based on individual personality traits, learnt values in societal cultures, and agency performance theories.

Part 2 reviews the pros and cons of alternative techniques and methods commonly used in research seeking to understanding trust and trustworthiness. This includes game simulations, field observations, laboratory and field experiments, case studies, formal modelling, expert surveys, longitudinal macro and micro panel surveys, and cross-sectional comparative surveys. Debate continues about the advantages of using experiments, facilitating causal inference about relationships through manipulating the context, as widely employed in behavioral economics and social psychology, compared with using descriptive observational data from social surveys, maximizing generalizability in any observed relationships, the approach most common in political science, comparative sociology, and studies of public opinion.

The conclusion in Part 3 suggests that mixed methods are the most appropriate research design for the TRUEDEM project, combining the capacity to observe general cross-national patterns and time-series trends through large-scale representative surveys conducted across European societies with the use of survey experiments, testing the reliability and validity of our measures and facilitating causal inference.

1 Background

For many decades the conventional view has overwhelmingly celebrated the positive consequences of trust, a quality believed to oil the wheels of personal relationships in local communities, provide the foundations for democratic legitimacy in the state, and facilitate cooperation across national borders in the European Union. Scholars and popular commentators, both liberals and conservatives, have usually expressed deep concern where there are plausible signs of either excessive cynicism within particular societies, and/or signs of declining trust over time. More recent work has challenged this conventional notion, however, identifying blind or uncritical trust as equally problematic, as well as emphasizing that it is important to focus on the relationships between trust and trustworthiness (Carstens, 2023). To understand these debates, Part 1 sets out the conceptual framework and unpacks the definitions and approaches in the literature which has developed since the mid-twentieth century across diverse disciplines. Part 2 reviews the pros and cons of alternative techniques and methods commonly used in research seeking to understand trust and trustworthiness. The conclusion in Part 3 presents the reasons why mixed methods are the most appropriate research design for the TRUEDEM project.

2 Theories about the origins of trust

What theories illuminate the drivers of trust and trustworthiness? The contemporary literature about the causes of trust has generated an extensive body of theoretical and empirical research by social scientists in diverse disciplines. Diagnosing the underlying causes and the consequences is critical to identifying effective remedies.

Three alternative schools of thought have long been debated within the social sciences. *Social psychologists* often regard generalized (or social) trust as an affective feeling, rooted in individual personality predispositions and innate characteristics, associated with other positive traits such as sociability, optimism, and cooperation. In this view, people are born and grow up as trusting or cynical, just as they are introverts or extroverts, open or closed, with important consequences for how interpersonal relationships, societies and states function. Alternatively, *cultural sociologists* emphasize the role of early childhood socialization processes for the acquisition of enduring values, cognitive and moral beliefs, social attitudes, and behavioural norms, and the stamp of social cultures, shaping trust towards other people, social groups, institutions, and nations. These orientations are thought to persist as stable worldviews within each society. Evolutionary changes in social cultures are attributed to long-term secular trends of societal modernization and generational replacement of successive birth cohorts within the population, more than period or life-cycle effects. By contrast, *performance* theories, common in political economy and behavioural economics, suggest that attitudes are more fluid, reflecting rational calculations in decision-making processes about trustworthy relationships. In particular, judgments of trustworthiness are thought to reflect evaluations of the past competency of agents and agencies in delivering upon social contracts by principals, as well as the quality of accountability institutions and processes. Each of these theoretical perspectives provides alternative interpretations of the drivers of trust and trustworthiness, and the malleability of trends.

2.1 Trusting individuals

The early psychological literature regarded interpersonal trust (among people) as critical for nearly all social dealings, the foundation for happy, well-functioning relationships in the home, workplace, and public sphere. The early work was individualistic, where trust was seen as an enduring affective trait hardwired into our brain that forms part of our basic personality and is largely independent of our adult experience of the external world (Cawvey et al., 2017; Freitag & Bauer, 2016; Mondak, 2010; Rotenberg, 2010). The concept of ‘personality’ is understood by psychologists as persistent patterns of attitudes and behaviour, a largely stable orientation throughout one’s lifetime, whether inherited genetically from parents, or else learnt during the early formative years (Bouchard, 1997; Rotenberg, 2010; Stamos et al. 2019; Stolle & Nishikawa, 2011; Sturgis et al., 2010).

Psychological accounts emphasize that some are born trusters and some are born cynics. Both carry their genetic predispositions around with them as adults, affecting how they interact with friends and strangers, and how much they are open or closed towards other groups and nations (Sturgis et al., 2010). Thus, trusters have an open and sunny disposition with a propensity towards believing the best in others and rarely suspecting hidden intent. Because of their psychological history and make-up, and their early life experiences, trusting individuals are thought to have an optimistic view of life and they are willing to help others, cooperate, and be sociable. Personality types are regarded as stable across contexts, so that an individual who is trusting towards friends and family is also likely to trust neighbours and strangers, displaying cooperative behaviours, like civic engagement and cooperation to build better societies. Cynics, by contrast, have personality traits suspecting that others are likely to betray them. Their personality tends to be more pessimistic and misanthropic, guarded or alienated, more distrustful and cautious of others, and pessimistic about social affairs and about people and politicians in general. Both trust and cynicism are thought to be traits rooted in personalities and thus fixed and enduring without much reference to social contexts and life’s lessons.

The early psychological literature treated individual-level trust and institutional confidence (or distrust and lack of confidence) as basic stable aspects of personality types (Freitag & Bauer, 2016). According to Erikson, for example, feelings of inner goodness, trust in others and oneself, and optimism comprise a “basic trust” personality trait formed in the first stages of psychological development as a result of the mother-baby feeding experience. These childhood personality traits, it is argued, are enduring and general, influencing many aspects of adult behaviour, including social relationships (Allport & Bracken, 1973; Cattell, 1973; Erikson, 1950). The capacity to develop intimacy in adulthood is thought to be influenced by formative socialization experiences with parents early in life, learning from childhood bonds of intimacy that others will protect us, with experiments suggesting that even three- and four-year-old children have the capacity to differentiate between people who are trustworthy and those who aren’t. Seminal work of the social psychologist Morris Rosenberg also argued that alienation, trust in people, and beliefs that people are fundamentally cooperative and inclined to help others combine to form a single “trust in people” scale (Rosenberg, 1956). Some individuals are thought to have an optimistic view of life and are willing to help others, cooperate, and be trusting because of their psychological history and make-up, and their early life experiences. Others are thought to be more pessimistic and misanthropic, guarded or alienated, more distrustful and cautious of others, and generally pessimistic about social affairs and about people and politicians. In this regard, trust is seen as an affective and persistent orientation that forms part of the DNA of our basic personality, whether

genetic or learnt in the formative years of childhood and adolescence, although subsequent experiences in new roles and adult experience of the external world may also influence feelings of trust (Dawson, 2019; Rotenberg, 2010; Sturgis et al., 2010). Other classic accounts in the mid-twentieth century can also help to explain trust and deference towards those in authority, such as Solomon Asch and Stanley Milgram's seminal experiments illustrating the power of conformity when compliantly following the crowd in adopting false beliefs (Asch, 1956; Milgram, 1974).

Contemporary psychologists continue to research the roots of interpersonal trust among children and adolescents, and how this affects, and is affected by, their interaction with parents and siblings, peers and social groups (Rotenberg, 2010). Hence Uslaner argues that generalized social trust is an enduring affective orientation learnt during the formative years of childhood: *“Trust is a moral value that does not depend upon personal experience or on interacting with people in civic groups or informal socializing. Instead, we learn to trust from our parents, and trust is stable over long periods of time. Trust depends on an optimistic world view: the world is a good place and we can make it better”* (Uslaner, 2002). This cheerful predisposition is thought to have beneficial consequences for civil society, irrespective of whether or not the world actually *is* a benign place. Faith in societal cooperation is assumed to make this more likely to happen. In Uslaner's words, *“Moralistic trusters believe that the world is a benign place, that other people are generally well motivated, and that they share similar moral premises. In the words of the standard survey research question, they believe that ‘most people can be trusted.’ Such beliefs ease the way toward getting people to work together to make their communities (and the larger society) a better place”* (Uslaner, 2002). By contrast, this view regards ‘strategic’ trust, based on utilitarian evaluations of performance, as of limited value, because this is unlikely to have beneficial social consequences, like giving to charity or volunteering service.

During the last two decades, psychologists have considered how trust is related to what has been termed the ‘Big Five’ personality traits, including Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, and Openness to Experience. These are regarded as stable aspects of individuals persisting through the life cycle that shape how people respond to the world across diverse situations (McCrae & Costa, 1997; McCrae & Costa, 2003). Trust is understood within this framework as a trait linked with Agreeableness, reflecting pro-social and communal feelings towards others, rather than antagonism (Freitag & Bauer, 2016). For Yamagishi and Yamagishi, interpersonal trust is defined as *“a belief in the benevolence of human nature in general”* (Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994). These psychological characteristics are thought to predict human relationships as well as patterns of political behaviour, such as civic engagement and political activism (Gerber et al., 2011; Mondak & Halperin, 2008; Mondak, 2010).

2.2 Challenges to psychological accounts

The classic psychological approach continues to influence our understanding of trust in the research literature, yet this approach can be challenged in several important regards.

Firstly, if trust is largely fixed and inherited from birth or acquired in early childhood, hardwired into our basic personality, the account is unable to explain any sharp fluctuations in public opinion observed to occur at individual or societal levels, for example why trust in government suddenly rebounded in America in a ‘rally-around-the-flag’ effect observed after 9/11, or how political trust in national governments and the European Union responded to the events of the 2008 financial recession in Europe, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, or the Covid-19 pandemic (Arpino &

Obydenkova, 2020; Chanley, 2002). Responses to surveys, the psychological approach assumes, tell us something about the individuals who express feelings of trust rather than something about the world in which they live and the trustworthiness of agents. Psychological research using this approach has also focused mainly upon interpersonal and generalized trust (of unknown others, such as strangers and foreigners), rather than upon its institutionalized forms. Studies have sought to identify the micro-level characteristics of trust – such as differences by age/birth cohort, sex/gender, education, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status/ income – and related affective traits such as feelings of self-esteem, well-being and security – but more rarely on macro-level factors that may be expected to drive fluctuations in trust, like long-term changes in demography and cultural values in society, or short-term changes in economic and political events, government performance, media frames, or international developments (Stamos et al., 2019; Stolle & Nishikawa, 2011). In addition, the focus on innate characteristics can also be seen as largely deterministic, so that it becomes difficult to identify effective practical social interventions or political reforms which could be implemented to strengthen feelings of trust. As Freitag and Bauer say: *“If we agree that personality traits are, to a certain extent, rooted in biology and that certain personality traits affect trust judgments, it also means that trust is also inherited to a certain degree”* (Freitag & Bauer, 2016, p.473). Biological genetics can be regarded as destiny.

Finally, there are normatively issues. If feelings of trust are relatively fixed and stable from birth, or inherited from parental role models in early childhood, this may still have certain positive benefits. In particular, from the perspective of the authorities, this orientation can be expected to encourage feelings of solidarity and willingness to cooperate, as well as encouraging citizens to comply obediently with formal laws, rules, and informal social norms. Local communities will work towards common goals. Citizens will obey states. Societies will comply with international agreements. But indiscriminate trust of both the untrustworthy and trustworthy alike can also potentially generate negative consequences for individuals and states. The credulous, characterized by a sunny and open view of the world, are left unprotected from exploitation by bad actors, like the lies of demagogues, identity-theft thieves online, and conspiracy theories. Similarly, cynical individuals inheriting overly negative or wary predispositions are also at risk, if they feel unable to delegate decisions and rely upon the advice of others, like anti-vaxxers rejecting science, even when agents and agencies are competent, benevolent, and honest (Freitag & Bauer, 2016).

Empirical micro-level evidence testing causal claims in psychological theories have used different techniques such as individual-level longitudinal panel surveys, lab experiments, or dyadic parent-child or paired twin studies to trace inherited characteristics, early parent-child relationships within the family, or adolescent learning and development. These techniques cannot be analysed from the data available through cross-national surveys of the adult population. But the thesis does generate several empirically testable propositions about the consequences of interpersonal and institutional trust which can be re-examined using the comparative survey evidence gathered by TRUEDEM. If trust is indeed a basic personality trait or stable predisposition, these attitudes can be expected to be closely related to other types of individual-level psychological indicators of affective well-being, also included in surveys, such as feelings of life satisfaction, happiness, health, personal security, and sociability. Moreover, individuals with trusting personalities should also be expected to display indiscriminately positive attitudes towards a wide range of diverse agents and institutions, irrespective of their specific functions and past record, for example, consistently trusting both friends and strangers, as well as expressing confidence in institutions of political

parties, parliament and governments, and EU agencies like the European Commission. Several aspects of this influential approach will therefore be re-examined within this project.

2.3 Or trusting societal cultures?

Sociological theories, by contrast, focus upon the macro-level, emphasizing that societies stamp enduring cultural values and social norms upon those growing up within each local community, nation-state, and world region, generating enduring geographic contrasts in trust evident across societies. Cultural theories seek to explain enduring cross-national contrasts in attitudes and values observed in social surveys, such as why Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians are generally characterized by high levels of interpersonal trust and social tolerance, a deep reservoir of confidence in democratic government which persists through good times and bad, while those living in the Nordic region also support international co-operation with the U.N. agencies of global governance. By contrast, citizens in equivalent post-industrial societies in the Southern Mediterranean, such as those in Italy, Greece and Spain, have long expressed minimal generalized trust, far greater suspicion of state institutions than their Nordic cousins, and greater dissatisfaction with how their democracy works (Cavalli, 2011; Delhey & Newton, 2005; Norris, 2011). The comparative sociological tradition, rooted in the earliest work by Lerner (1958) and by Almond and Verba (1963), suggests that cultural attitudes, values and beliefs persist since they are reproduced in each society for decades, or even for centuries, by social conditions and by collective agencies of cultural transmission. Thus individualistic Southern Europeans come to see government and politics as threatening and corrupt, while Northern Europeans, favouring the values of solidarity and cooperation, learn to regard the democratic state more benevolently as a way to work together for common goals.

Sociological accounts overlap with psychological accounts which suggest that trust, like many other related attitudes, values, and beliefs, is learnt individually through early socialization processes and thus derived from formative role models like parents and family, neighbours and peers during childhood and adolescence. The values which parents seek to instil through child-rearing practices are thought to instil habitual feelings of generalized trust or mistrust among their children which persist throughout their lifetime. But cultural accounts also place greater emphasis on how trusting orientations are acquired from experience of the collective agencies of cultural transmission within each society, including from levels of societal development and security, the role of formal education in schools and colleges, moral teachings from religious organizations and faith communities, information acquired from the mass and social media, informal networks and social norms learnt through participation in voluntary organizations and community associations, and from experience in the workplace and local community (Stolle & Nishikawa, 2011).

In particular, theory of modernization suggests that the social conditions under which people grow up in each society are critical for the acquisition of enduring cultural values. Early experience of security, from growing up in affluent post-industrial economies with long-established democratic states and comprehensive cradle-to-grave welfare states with universal benefits, are expected to lead towards more trusting attitudes (Kumlin, 2004; Kumlin & Rothstein, 2005). By contrast, deep mistrust is expected in this account to be evident among those with formative experiences during childhood and adolescence of being raised among poorer and less secure sectors in developing nations, as well as for citizens in authoritarian states governed by repressive and corrupt rulers, and in deeply divided urban communities afflicted by conflict, crime, and violence. This perspective suggests that trusting orientations towards other people and government can be expected to evolve

slowly in society over time. For example, Bergh and Öhrvall (2018) report that trust persisted as a sticky trait, even among expatriate Swedes living abroad in developing countries with unstable societies and corrupt governance. Similarly, Algan and Cahuc (2010) suggest that among contemporary Americans, those claiming a Nordic family heritage are likely to display considerable trust today compared with those with migrant roots descended from Southern and Eastern Europe. In adulthood, cultural theories suggest that the learning process slows, with value change in society arising primarily from demographic processes of generational turnover, as the entry of younger birth cohorts into the population gradually replaces older cohorts, rather than from life-cycle effects associated with ageing like experience of marriage, home ownership, and entry into the workforce, or period effects attributed to the impact of ‘shock’ events.

Modernization theory developed by Ronald Inglehart, and accounts of social capital by Robert Putnam, provide the classic paradigms for understanding these processes. Hence Inglehart argues that the social and economic conditions under which people grow up are important for the acquisition of enduring cultural values among different generations. Processes of societal modernization and human development are theorized to transform cultural attitudes and beliefs, especially citizens’ relationships with the state. Economic growth profoundly transforms poorer societies, bringing many characteristics of advanced industrialized societies, including expanded affluence and leisure time, growing access to higher education, and the proliferation of media information (Inglehart, 1977; Inglehart, 1997; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Modernization theories posit that economic growth, technological development, rising levels of education, and the expansion of mass communication in post-industrial societies transform citizens’ civic skills and value orientations, weakening attachments to political parties and traditional interest groups, and diminishing voting participation, while swelling the propensity to engage in direct forms of activism such as consumer-politics and mass demonstrations (Klingemann & Fuchs, 1998). Compared with the attitudes of their parents and grandparents, Inglehart argues that the younger college-educated generation growing up in secure post-industrial societies are far more likely to question traditional forms of hierarchical authority, such as the institutions of elections, parliaments, governments, the army, and the police. Through demographic replacement, as younger generational cohorts succeed older ones, the reservoir of political trust in government is thought to gradually erode (Inglehart, 1977; Inglehart, 1997; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005).

Similarly, Putnam’s explanation of the decline of social capital in America attributes this largely to processes of social development and generational change. In particular, he emphasizes the importance of the gradual replacement of the ‘Silent’ generation of Americans, who shared the collective experience of living through the immense disruption of two World Wars and the Great Depression, with the younger generations of Americans growing up with more individualistic values and privatized leisure habits in the 1960s and 1970s, following the rise of the television age (Clark, 2015; Putnam, 2001; Schwadel & Stout, 2012). Putnam argues that the older generations were often active through belonging to a wide range of local voluntary organizations, working together with neighbours upon collective problems, by contrast the younger generations were less likely to join and become active in these groups and associations.

Cultural theories suggest several predictions open to testing against survey data gathered by the TRUEDEM project. Most broadly, this perspective suggests that a legacy of similar attitudes of social, political, and international trust should be observed at macro-level in countries and world regions sharing common values and norms. This includes cross-cultural linkages such as those derived from shared religious legacies in Protestant and Catholic Europe or in the Southern

Mediterranean and Nordic states, linguistic ties shared across national borders in the Francophone Low Countries, processes of economic development and democratization experienced in Central and Eastern Europe, historical legacies derived from common borders of states in the former Yugoslavia, and memories of the Soviet state and experience of common security threats from Russia among NATO member states in Central and Eastern Europe. These residual attitudes can be expected to be deep-rooted historically, evolving closely, and thus persisting over many decades as sticky shared cultural orientations towards trust in nations and global regions almost irrespective of the contemporary short or medium-term performance of regimes and states, such as the disruption triggered by rapid opening of market economies in Central Europe, transitions from authoritarianism in post-Communist Europe, or processes of democratic backsliding observed in recent years among EU member states. According to this theory, cultural attitudes and values are predicted to be path dependent, so that observed patterns of social, political and international trust should be observed to reflect past societal experiences – but legacy attitudes and beliefs are unlikely to respond to contemporary changes in social conditions, like sudden upticks or downturns in levels of unemployment and growth, the shock of Brexit for trust in European neighbouring states, or shifts in the quality of European governance, like the rise to power of authoritarian populist parties and leaders in Hungary and Poland.

2.4 Or agency performance?

The final alternative perspective expounded in this project builds upon the extensive literature in political economy which has examined empirical evidence for performance theories. This account can be applied to multiple agents and institutions, such as trust in the media, the military, or banks, but it has most commonly been applied empirically to understand trust in government institutions. In performance accounts, political trust is explained either by subjective public perceptions or objective indicators of the competence, integrity, and impartiality of governments.

The first approach predicts that citizens will have greater confidence in state institutions where governing parties have established a track record demonstrating competency in delivering upon their promises, especially by managing the effective delivery of essential public goods and services. Short-term upturns and downturns in economic performance, like the effects on employment of the Eurozone banking crisis in 2007/8 and from the post-Covid rise in inflation, are expected to be correlated with subsequent thermostatic shifts in public confidence in government and political institutions like parliaments and parties, as well as their general satisfaction with democracy (Chanley et al., 2000; Chanley, 2002). This view is similar to standard theories of economic voting which assume that citizens are able to recognise and respond to changes in economic conditions attributable to public policies, in order to assign responsibility, and reward or penalize governments accordingly at the ballot box (Lewis-Beck & Nadeau, 2011). Empirical studies have usually defined performance fairly narrowly when analysing standard aggregate indicators from official statistics measuring the government's competency in managing the macroeconomy, such as by expanding the national economy, as well as by minimizing inflation, unemployment, and poverty (Dahlberg et al., 2015). Researchers have examined individual-level survey data to see whether trust relates to subjective satisfaction with the state of the national and household economy (Finkel et al, 1989; Newton, 2006; Weatherford, 1987). Based on these sorts of claims, Kettl (2017) suggests that governments could earn back public trust by getting better at doing what he calls the retail level functions of delivering, operationally, policies that are fair and effective, connected to what people want.

But when evaluating government performance, does the public care most about policy outcomes – or are they also concerned about political procedures, reflecting how power and authority is exercised in any state? (Easton, 1975; Schmidt, 2013) A second strand of the research literature has studied the performance of government decision-making processes. Many researchers have focused on whether generalized social and political trust are strengthened by what is commonly termed ‘good’ government or the ‘quality’ of government, including institutions concerned with implementation and enforcement, like the quality of rule of law, transparency, and oversight which seek to protect the integrity and impartiality of policy-making processes and prevent the abuse of power by any branch of government (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008). Others suggest that public confidence is also influenced by the function of institutions and processes on the ‘input’ side of liberal democracy that channel citizen’s demands into the policymaking process, like the integrity of free and fair elections, the inclusiveness of channels of political participation, and competition among political parties (Warren, 1999).

At the same time, however, standard performance theories face also considerable challenges. In particular, there are several reasons why it is difficult to establish convincing empirical evidence connecting subjective perceptions of government competency, integrity and impartiality with subsequent levels of social and political trust among citizens.

Policy outcome studies using cross-national comparisons usually assume that the public decides whether governments are trustworthy based on their country’s economic record compared against the benchmark of equivalent conditions in similar neighbouring states or countries – such as how well the Biden administration handled the economic disruption in America caused by the Covid-19 pandemic compared with experience of equivalent disruptions in the UK, Spain, or Germany. But it remains unclear what values and information citizens use to evaluate the government’s performance. Do voters judge the economic record of their government against the benchmark and targets which governing parties promised to achieve in their campaign, party manifesto, and leadership election speeches? Or is economic management evaluated retrospectively by the public as doing better or worse than the past performance of successive administrations and leaders within a country, thus comparing pandemic cases, fatalities and mitigation measures under the Trump and Biden administrations? Similar considerations face studies of the impartiality and integrity of government procedures.

Moreover, for studies of competent policy delivery, what issues count? Are economic conditions the most salient criteria used by the public to evaluate the government’s record and competence, as often assumed, or should studies expand their scope by also monitoring the impact of government decisions and actions on a far broader range of salient non-economic issues which the public regards as the most important problems facing the country, such as the provision of public welfare services like health and education, challenges of environmental protection and climate change, or foreign policies such as engagement in international cooperation and conflict (Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017). Similarly, does the public care most about procedural issues of corruption, fairness, or inclusion?

In addition, even when strong correlations are observed to link public trust and government performance indices, challenges of causal inference arise in our interpretation of the direction of causality involved in the core relationships. Many studies have used subjective evaluations of policy and procedural performance, such as public opinion surveys monitoring satisfaction with the government’s handling of the state of the economy, the state of corruption, the fairness of elections, and so on (Boswell, 2018; Norris, 2022; Van der Meer & Dekker, 2011; Van der Meer

& Hakhverdian, 2017). It would not be surprising, however, if our feelings of trustworthiness prove to be closely associated with such *subjective* perceptions of the past performance of agents. Indeed, this is commonly observed, thus people expressing confidence in their personal financial position and in the state of their nation's economy are often also more willing to trust political institutions, as well as expressing more satisfaction with the workings of democracy. Yet the direction of causality in this complex relationship remains indeterminate; interpretations based on surveys taken at a single point of time face issues of endogeneity where prior beliefs and preferences may colour assessments of good or bad performance. Do perceptions of a strong economic performance lead me to be more trusting about the government? Or because I trust a particular party or leader, am I more likely to be positive when assessing their economic record?

Even if the direction is demonstrated to run from prior subjective assessments of performance to subsequent feelings of trust, this in itself cannot be regarded as providing sceptical and informed assessments, not least because many other factors covary. The links connecting subjecting feelings of economic satisfaction with political trust are complex to interpret with cross-sectional survey data alone due to issues of reciprocal causation (Boswell, 2018; Van der Meer & Dekker, 2011; Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017). Among US Republicans, for example, Pew surveys report that optimism about the state of the American economy shot up one month after President Trump won the November 2016 US election. Three quarters of Republicans predicted that the economy would get better, up from 29% the previous June, even though there was no change in the underlying economic indicators (Pew Research Center, 2017). Similarly, Pew surveys in September 2018 report that perceptions that presidents are honest and trustworthy are closely conditioned by partisanship; with around three-quarters of Republicans believing that Trump is trustworthy, compared with one in ten Democrats (Pew Research Center, 2019). Challenges can also arise when inferring causal links between trust and objective measures of performance, since again reciprocal relationships may operate, for example if more generalized trust in society serves to make markets more efficient, thereby strengthening prosperity. Attempts to overcome these limitations involve using longitudinal panel surveys repeatedly interviewing the same respondents over an extended period of months or years, applying instrumental variables, as well as by using laboratory, field, or population-based survey experiments (Dinesen & Sønderskov, 2021). Finally, while most work has examined indices of government performance, fewer studies have sought to apply this theory to other types of agents or agencies. Yet this is empirically testable if a broad consensus exists about the core values served by social institutions in the public, non-profit and private sectors and where systematic evidence is available from time-series and cross-unit indices about their performance. Fortunately, the last decade has seen a resurgence of cross-national and time-series social indicators in multiple international agencies, such as those compiled by the OECD, World Bank, and Eurostat (Cooley & Snyder, 2015). This includes the harmonized official statistics used to monitor annual progress worldwide since 1990 towards specific targets within the Sustainable Development Goals endorsed by the world's governments, for example concerning health and well-being, poverty and gender equality, and climate action (United Nations, 2015). Other statistical data is available at different levels of analysis and periodicity to compare international variations in trust on a sector-by-sector basis, for example concerning the performance of major corporations, doctors and health care, the police and crime, journalists, news and social media, philanthropic foundations, and intergovernmental organizations, like NATO, the UN, and the EU. TRUEDEM will use standard econometric techniques to monitor relationships between public trust (measured at national level by European social surveys) and performance indices across diverse agents and agencies beyond central government.

3 Methods and research designs

What other methods, evidence and techniques would allow theories of trust and trustworthiness to be tested empirically? Varied techniques, analytical approaches, and data sources have been used in diverse disciplines, including game simulations, field observations, laboratory and field experiments, case studies, formal modelling, macro and micro-level longitudinal panel surveys, instrumental variables, and cross-sectional comparative surveys (Lyon, 2015). Each has its own strengths and limits. In particular, debate continues about the pros and cons of using lab experiments facilitating causal inference, widely employed in behavioural economics and social psychology, and using descriptive observational data from social surveys, maximizing generalizability in any observed relationships, common in political sociology.

3.1 Experimental designs

Perhaps the most common approach, used by social psychologists and behavioural economists to support strong causal inferences, examines micro-level interpersonal trust relationships by utilizing experimental game simulations within artificial laboratory settings. Experiments control the recruitment, random assignment, and measurement of subjects randomized into treatment groups to maximize causal inference. This approach is exemplified by the canonical Prisoner Dilemma role playing exercise, designed by Berg et al. (1995) to model the willingness of pairs of individuals to engage in hypothetical forms of cooperative behaviour, treated as a proxy measure of expectations about the trustworthiness of other people. In a widely cited study conducted among Harvard undergraduates, Glaezer and colleagues (2000) manipulated trust games among senders and receivers involving small monetary rewards. They concluded that trusting behaviour (the return of a monetary gift) was not predicted by attitudes of social trust, using standard survey questions. Experiments manipulating key variables in treatments, such as selecting groups of subjects based on their gender or race or varying the risks and rewards in any hypothetical simulation, is thought to allow researchers to pinpoint alternative causes and conditions of trust. To strengthen the external validity, robustness, and generalizability of any findings, trust simulations have been implemented in different countries and contexts – and the results compared with survey data among representative populations (Johnson & Mislin, 2011). These methods are most useful for precise control of the experimental conditions, holding other aspects constant, and thus for making causal inferences about individual behaviour with a reasonable degree of confidence, ruling out confounding conditions (Druckman et al., 2011). Laboratory experiments monitor hypothetical forms of inter-personal cooperative behaviour among individuals, treated as a proxy for social or interpersonal trust, as well as the background characteristics of those who trust, such as their education, race or ethnicity, or age cohort (Mutz & Reeves, 2005).

Nevertheless, game simulations and lab experiments have several key limitations for our purposes. Firstly, the highly artificial lab setting facilitates precise control of interpersonal social trust relationships, but it is less suited to monitor dimensions of trustworthiness which cannot be easily manipulated, due to practical or ethical constraints (McDermott, 2002). Experimental games have been used to study the effect on trusting behaviour of introducing various rules, such as sanction systems (Irwin et al., 2014) and binding contracts (Malhotra & Murnighan, 2002). Simulations like the Prisoner's Dilemma game are designed to provide reliable insights into human motivations, since 'actions speak louder than words'. In practice, however, willingness to engage in cooperative behaviours may be the result of multiple factors other than trust. Participants may choose to return

monetary gifts due to their preference for risk aversion, perceptions of socially desirable behaviours, or altruism towards others, as much as any judgments of reciprocal trustworthiness (Sapienza et al., 2013).

Moreover, it is hazardous to generalize about human behaviour on the basis of hypothetical reactions among atypical local groups commonly used for lab experiments, such as students or paid volunteers. The randomization process selects participants into control and treatment groups to determine group similarities and differences in response to the treatment. But this does not necessarily allow broader generalizations beyond the selected populations; the reaction to any treatment condition of young college students in Iowa or paid local volunteers in Michigan may well be expected to differ from that of older Americans in Florida or black rural populations in Mississippi, let alone the response of diverse peoples living in other cultures and countries across Europe.

Comparativists emphasize that the broader cultural, institutional, and societal-level context is critical for trust and trustworthy relationships, as illustrated by the well-established high social and political trust observed in Scandinavia and Northern Europe, compared with far greater mistrust commonly recorded in post-Communist Europe and Latin America (Zmerli & Hooghe 2011). A few large-scale cross-national field experiments have been conducted among the general public, exemplified by the global ‘dropped wallet’ study, a rigorous but expensive research design (Cohn et al., 2019).

Population-based survey experiments are growing in popularity as these combine the advantages of generalizability, from a representative sample of the general adult population, with the rigor from random allocation of survey respondents to control and treatment groups (Mutz, 2011). Yet unfortunately, despite its strengths, survey experiments are also costly to implement, especially across societies, so they remain far less common than those conducted among small groups in artificial laboratory settings (Wilson, 2017). To expand our scientific knowledge, the TRUEDEM project will use cross-national survey experiments in selected European countries as part of its design, providing different informational cues about an agency to test for variations in citizen’s judgements of trustworthiness.

Researchers have also taken advantage of longitudinal panel surveys which monitor changes in the attitudes and opinions of the same individual respondents over successive waves to take advantage of naturally occurring random events, maximizing realism. For example, this approach has been used to examine the dynamics of American trust before and after the events of 9/11 (Gross et al., 2004), among Leave and Remain voters in the UK pre-post the Brexit referendum (Jennings, 2021), how far trust influences people’s willingness to vote for protest parties (Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018), and whether the quality of political institutions influences subsequent levels of generalized trust (Robbins, 2012a, 2012b). In practice, however, the impact of real-world ‘shock’ events may also prove far from randomly distributed. For example, the Covid-19 pandemic led some U.S. states to expand balloting facilities, like no-excuse postal and advance voting, which could be expected to increase convenient and thus state voter turnout. Overall levels of electoral turnout in the 2020 US presidential election were the highest in America since 1960. But the adoption of these facilities was far from uniform across the country, generating confounding conditions, since Democratic-controlled states were more likely to implement advance voting than Republican-controlled ones, and the initial spread of the virus during spring 2020 was more severe in urban areas and coastal regions of America than in isolated rural counties.

3.2 The comparative framework

The classic logic of comparative politics is to observe judgments of trustworthiness towards different types of agents among diverse groups, including those living in a wide variety of European societies, cultures, and institutional contexts, providing a high degree of generalizability (Lijphart, 1971; Przeworski & Teune, 1970). Cross-national studies using survey data about trust have usually focused upon liberal democracies, where survey datasets have long been established, such as the Eurobarometer, European Social Survey, the International Social Survey Program, and national election studies. Building upon this foundation, TRUEDEM will also compare a wide range of affluent post-industrial European societies where reliable time-series survey data has traditionally been most plentiful, such as Germany, France, and Sweden, to replicate and update previous research. Yet seeking to generalize from Western countries alone unintentionally distorts our understanding of this global phenomenon, by focusing upon a truncated and skewed distribution of cases. Experimental studies report that if you lost a wallet full of cash in Geneva, Oslo, or Stockholm, for example, you could safely bet that someone will probably seek to return it to you or to hand it into the police. But the same calculation could well prove foolhardy in, say, Lima, Moscow, or Nairobi (Cohn et al., 2019). Generalizing based on long-standing European democracies alone is problematic, especially to understand trust and trustworthiness changes in democratization and autocratization. TRUEDEM seeks to expand the conventional comparative framework to include diverse contexts, including in Central and Eastern states. The risks of trusting the authorities are highest among closed societies governed by repressive rulers, like Russia and Belarus, with minimal domestic guardrails against the abuse of executive power, especially in major states resistant to international pressures, and with state control of media. The cross-national framework will also seek to compare contrasts in the information and media environment characteristic of more open and more closed societies, since these conditions are predicted to be important for the accuracy of trust judgments.

Since this project's design seeks to generalize about social, political, and international trust across multiple diverse cultural contexts, including comparing levels of trust and trustworthiness in European societies, it draws largely upon pooled data from the European Values Survey/World Values Survey and related studies like the European Social Survey, the Eurobarometer, and Pew surveys. The pooled EVS/WVS dataset across all seven waves, used in subsequent reports, facilitates comparison of cross-national and longitudinal survey data gathered from representative samples of the adult population in 120 societies around the world over successive waves from 1981 to 2022 (Haerper et al., 2022). TRUEDEM focuses, in particular, on analysing on the most recent (7th) wave of the EVS/WVS pooled survey, where new items on trust have been included, with data gathered in over 70 societies during 2017-2022. Both datasets include varied societal contexts, for example to compare absolute levels of trust commonly observed among the public living in open and closed societies under different types of liberal democracies, electoral democracies, and electoral autocracies, as well as across Protestant, Catholic or Orthodox religious cultures, as well as in high- and middle-income economies with different levels and trends in human development since 1990. The European/ World Values Surveys contain numerous items monitoring absolute levels of social trust, confidence in a wide range of national institutions, and trust in international organizations. As such, it provides one of the most suitable survey datasets for TRUEDEM to monitor European public opinion.

4 Conclusions: The mixed method research design

In general, the review of alternative methods suggests that no single approach is likely to be whole satisfactory for testing empirically some of the core propositions arising from the major theoretical perspectives on trust and trustworthiness.

The most common research design in comparative sociology and public opinion research has used the standard series of social surveys and opinion polls aggregated at national level. Trends and countries have been commonly compared over time to discern the direction of changes in citizens' trust and confidence, including in governments, political parties, the courts, parliaments, the civil service, and leaders. Different studies often provide alternative interpretations of even the same survey data, however, depending upon the choice of time-periods and cross-national framework for analysis. The classic case illustrating this tendency was the immense outpouring of new work on social capital when widespread concern about this phenomenon rose in the early-to-mid 1990s, catalysed by Robert Putnam's seminal work on Italy and the United States (Putnam et al., 1993; Putnam, 2001). In retrospect, however, the trends of declining social trust and associational membership observed in American surveys from the 1960s to the early-1990s appear to be atypical of other affluent post-industrial, like Sweden and France (Putnam, 2004). Subsequent U.S. surveys, like those conducted annually by NORC's General Social Survey, the Edelman Trust, and Gallup International, also suggest that long-term trends in social and political trust also fluctuated in the last two decades, and also trends varied across different agents and agencies, like the Supreme Court, Congress, and the presidency, rather than seeing further continuous uniform erosion across all branches (Jones, 2022). Moreover, observed upticks and downturns in trust cast doubt on theories emphasizing the stability of trust as a personality characteristic embedded in individuals, or as a cultural phenomenon embedded in social values.

The TRUEDEM project will therefore monitor European trends but also combine this data with performance indices across multiple agencies and agents, to be able to expand and deepen our understanding of cross-national medium and short-term volatility in public trust. The use of representative survey experiments and some qualitative focus groups in selected countries will also provide further insights into how far randomized exposure to varied types of informational messages about the competency, honesty and impartiality of agency performance influence subsequent public views about their trustworthiness – and how far the impact of the informational cues varies among different social sectors, such as by levels of prior knowledge and familiarity, patterns of partisanship, national contexts, and socio-demographic characteristics. The mixed methods combining both descriptive observational and survey experimental data is designed to overcome the limitations in each separate approach, breaking new scientific ground in our understanding of the causes of trust and trustworthiness.

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