



**TRUEDEM**

Trust in European Democracies

**TRUEDEM: Trust in European Democracies  
2023-2025**

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**FRAMEWORK REPORT ON INFORMATION  
ENVIRONMENTS AND TRUST-BUILDING: A  
VIRTUOUS CIRCLE REDUX -  
THE MEDIA & TRUSTWORTHINESS IN THE  
DIGITAL AGE**

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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.

### Summary of the Report (D7.1)

Should the news media be blamed for political cynicism? Part I describes the theoretical debate on this issue. This study seeks to examine empirical evidence concerning two arguments. The virtuous circle thesis predicts that at individual level, selection effects and media effects interact. Activists will be likely to pay attention to the news and public affairs. And knowledge gained from this process will strengthen informed judgments of political trustworthiness and lower barriers to civic engagement. Moreover, secondly, at macro-level, the information environment matters. Open societies expand the capacity of critical citizens to identify trustworthy agencies accurately, by providing two-sided forms of political communications about the performance of the authorities. By contrast, closed societies restricting the free press are likely to foster credulous trust in strongman leaders, which is unwarranted by their performance. Part II outlines the sources of survey cross-national and time-series data used to test these propositions from the European Social Survey in 39 countries. Part III presents the results. Part IV summarizes the main conclusions and considers their broader implications.

## Introduction

There is widespread concern that trust in government is corroding, contributing towards a legitimacy crisis in many Western democracies.<sup>1</sup> Lack of trust in the authorities is believed to undermine state capacity and the willingness of citizens to comply voluntarily with government policies and laws, from paying taxes to getting vaccinated.<sup>2</sup> Many factors are theorized to drive trust in government authorities, including faith, culture and performance.<sup>3</sup> Media malaise arguments claim that in democracies, public cynicism about political institutions is exacerbated by the way that journalists and commentators typically use sensationalism and gotcha video clips to report negative news about politics and public affairs, thereby throwing gas on the fire of civic disengagement.<sup>4</sup> Partisan attacks on 24/7 cable news, and misinformation and viral conspiracy theories on social media, in particular, are widely believed to fuel polarization, anger and cynicism in democracies.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, by contrast, in authoritarian states like Russia, news media control by the authorities, through propaganda, repression, and censorship, is blamed for disseminating fake news, suppressing dissent, and thereby strengthening support for strongman leaders.<sup>6</sup>

But are the media guilty as charged? Much empirical evidence examining ‘media malaise’ theories in democracies has focused on news frames and journalistic practices common in the United States. Yet America has an exceptionally market-driven media landscape.<sup>7</sup> It may be hazardous to generalize from this context to the typical balanced and neutral political coverage provided by public service broadcasters in more heavily regulated Northern European societies.<sup>8</sup> Two decades ago, the virtuous circle thesis found that, according to cross-national survey evidence from the EuroBarometer, attention to the news media (including information and communications from newspapers, television and radio news, and the Internet) was in fact *positively* correlated in European Union member states with greater civic knowledge, feelings of political efficacy, and trust and confidence in democratic institutions, not cynicism.<sup>9</sup> The virtuous circle thesis suggested that both ‘selection’ effects and ‘exposure’ effects were at the heart of this interactive process. At the same time, the study highlighted the importance of a cleavage dividing the more active and apathetic sectors of society in both habitual news media use and civic engagement.

Several subsequent studies provide further confirmation of the virtuous circle thesis.<sup>10</sup> Debate remains unresolved, however, not least because of popularity of ‘blaming the media messenger’ for more deep-rooted civic ills. Moreover, most comparative survey studies of political trust have either used cross-sectional evidence across countries or else longitudinal studies within specific societies. It is challenging to establish the direction of causality in the core relationships, however, in the absence of systematic longitudinal *panel* survey evidence providing repeated observations of respondents over successive waves in diverse media systems and journalistic cultures.

To address these issues, *Part I* describes the debate about the impact of the media on levels of political trust in the previous empirical literature and the contributions of this study in updating the survey evidence, expanding the comparative framework, and revising the normative and theoretical framework to focus on trustworthiness, not just trust. *Part II* outlines the sources of individual-level cross-national and time-series data from the first twenty years of the European Social Survey. The core concepts and measures of political trustworthiness and media environments are described, along with the main controls. Following the method used by Van der Meer and Van Erkel, ‘trustworthiness’ is measured in parsimonious regression models as the residual errors in how far governance performance predicts observed levels of public trust.<sup>11</sup> Country-year survey data for trends in political trust is matched at aggregate (national) level with policy output indices (such as levels of economic growth), and with procedural performance (the quality of good governance).

*Part III* presents the results. In particular, the study demonstrates further support for the Virtuous Circle thesis that exposure to newspapers and television news usually bolsters trust in the authorities, rather than generating negative effects. Moreover, the information environment in open societies usually strengthens rational subjective judgments of the trustworthiness of the authorities, as monitored by selected objective performance indicators. By contrast, the information environment in closed societies strengthens more irrational subjective evaluations about the authorities, or credulous trust, where public opinion is more positive than predicted based on selected objective performance indices alone. *Part IV* summarizes the main conclusions and considers their broader implications.

## 1 Theoretical Framework

A long tradition of ‘media malaise’ theories in political communications has claimed that in the United States, and in similar Western democracies, exposure to political communications through mass media channels typically fosters unduly adverse and cynical views among the public about politics and government. Scholars differ, however, about the underlying mechanisms thought to be involved in this process. Early American studies in the 1960s suggested that exposure to the world of crime, violence, and conflict on TV news and entertainment produce a ‘mean world effect’, eroding interpersonal trust.<sup>12</sup> Others claimed that investigative journalism had turned into adversarial ‘gotcha’ attacks, with tabloid headlines and 24/7 airwaves constantly highlighting allegations of government failure, personal scandal, and corruption, from Watergate to the Lewinsky affair, undermined public faith in democratic institutions.<sup>13</sup> Journalistic framing of American politics as an insider game or ‘horse-race’, emphasizing the strategic motivation of winners and losers in gaining popular support, has been blamed for the dearth of dry but essential civic information explaining public policy issues and legislative processes.<sup>14</sup>

The most recent wave of concern about these issues focuses on the polarizing effects of partisan journalism and media bubbles, coupled with the dissemination of fake news, misinformation and disinformation, exemplified by the spread of online conspiracy theories towards the risks of Covid-19 vaccines and the Big Lie of electoral fraud.<sup>15</sup> Television was the original *bête noir* for critics, but online media platforms from Twitter to Tik Toc have become the favourite piñata in the contemporary digital age.<sup>16</sup>

By contrast to these claims, however, another body of theory and empirical research has argued that in fact, attention to the news media in democratic societies commonly has a positive, not negative, effect on levels of political trust and civic engagement. In 2000, the virtuous circle thesis advanced the argument that an interactive sequential process is at work involving both ‘selection’ and ‘mobilization’ effects.<sup>17</sup> The process is believed to diverge down alternative pathways for active and apathetic citizens, however, with significant consequences.

In the first step, more politically interested, participatory, and knowledgeable individuals are expected to be more likely to pay attention to diverse sources of news and public affairs. In the second step, over time, this exposure is gradually expected to exert a positive learning effect, by strengthening civic awareness and thereby lowering the cognitive barriers to voting participation and political engagement. Since the *Civic Culture*, numerous studies have reported that formal education functions as one of the strongest predictors of political engagement, by empowering what Almond and Verba conceptualized as a sense of ‘civic competence’.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the news media in democratic states and open societies can function to provide citizens with information about contemporary problems, policy-making and legislative processes, the platform of political parties, and the position of candidates for elected office. Learning about politics via the news media should

strengthen cognitive skills and political knowledge, making it potentially easier for citizens to make informed choices at the ballot box, strengthening electoral accountability.

By contrast, in a world of proliferating choices, more politically apathetic news avoiders are more likely to switch channels or platforms to audiovisual entertainment, however, failing to learn much about politics and public affairs from the news media. They are thereby less likely to acquire the reservoir of knowledge from journalistic coverage needed to make rational evaluations of the performance of the government, holding leaders to account at the ballot box.

The virtuous circle thesis was summarized two decades ago: *“The most politically knowledgeable, trusting, and participatory are most likely to tune-in to public affairs coverage. And the thesis suggests that more apathetic sectors of the public, who are least interested and active in politics, are also least likely pay much, if any, attention to news, or indeed to trust media messages.”*<sup>19</sup> In the original study, empirical support for this theory was derived from analysis of cross-national Eurobarometer surveys in the mid-1990s; Europeans most attentive to news from TV and radio news, newspapers and the Internet were significantly more likely to endorse democratic principles, and to express greater confidence and trust in European and national political institutions, compared with those least attentive to these sources.

## 1.1 Why revisit the debate?

There are several reasons why the core logic, and the evidence concerning both the media malaise and the virtuous circle theories, deserve to be revisited. This includes (i) structural development transforming the contemporary media landscape in the digital age; (ii) the conceptual and normative shift from studies of ‘trust’ to understanding ‘trustworthiness’; and finally (iii) the need to expand the comparative framework to understand media effects in both more open and more closed societies.

### 1.1.1 Media landscapes in the digital age

Firstly, the original survey data supporting the virtuous circle thesis was gathered in European societies during the late-twentieth century, in a media landscape when national television markets were highly concentrated in a few channels. The public service tradition provided extensive news and current affairs broadcasts, limiting the capacity for news avoidance by viewers. During this era, most citizens reported in surveys that they continued to rely on mainstream TV evening news programs (often from public service channels) as their primary source of political information, followed by newspapers.<sup>20</sup> By contrast, the Internet, as we know it today, was in its infancy in the mid-to-late 1990s.

The claims deserve re-examining and updating today. The divide between politically active and apathetic sectors of the electorate is likely to have expanded during the early twenty-first century, given the profound transformation in the structure of the information environment and audiovisual media.<sup>21</sup> This includes the waning audience for legacy print newspapers and public service broadcasting, and the proliferation of digital alternatives.<sup>22</sup> Intentional or inattentive news avoidance is especially likely to occur in today’s fragmented information environment offering a plethora of alternative options to public affairs programs, especially digital apps attractive to younger generations, providing streaming entertainment, sports, computer games, and movies from Snapchat, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube to Tic Tok videos about cats.<sup>23</sup> The digital era should strengthen any selection effects by allowing news seekers to intentionally tune in -- and news avoiders to opt out—of political coverage.<sup>24</sup> The proliferation of misinformation and disinformation through digital communications is another major reason for concern.<sup>25</sup> This context



makes awareness about contemporary events more easily available, while also potentially heightening divisions and conflict over their meaning. Finally, as discussed later, UNESCO and international monitors emphasize that media landscapes have also changed in several European states like Russia and Hungary during the last decade by an erosion in freedom of expression and sources of independent journalism, including attacks on journalists, new legal restrictions, and threats to the news media's traditional business model.<sup>26</sup> These developments are likely to generate positive skews in coverage of incumbent leaders and governing parties where the authorities exert control over political reporting.

### 1.1.2 Trust or trustworthiness?

Moreover, the media malaise v. virtuous circle debate focused on the potential social psychological effects of news media exposure or attention on individuals and trends over time in levels of social and political trust. The conventional approach predominant in the empirical survey literature usually assumes implicitly that trust is always beneficial for democracy by ensuring regime legitimacy, state capacity and the voluntary compliance of citizens with the authorities. By contrast, political mistrust is widely blamed for generating a host of civic ills from the rise of populist parties and leaders to partisan polarization, falling turnout, disruptive protest politics, government dysfunction and legislative gridlock, and dissatisfaction with democracy.<sup>27</sup>

In recent years, however, conventional assumptions about the value of trust for democracy have come under growing challenge.<sup>28</sup> In particular, the positive or negative consequences of trust by citizens can only be understood in the light of the '*trustworthiness*' of state authorities.<sup>29</sup> Trustworthiness in this regard reflects an informal social contract in a dyadic principal-client relationship. Trustworthy agents can be conceptualized as those with a fiduciary ethical obligation to act in the interest of their clients. Principals authorize agents to act on their behalf in the expectation, despite conditions of risk and uncertainty, that the agent will fulfil their fiduciary responsibilities with competency, integrity and impartiality, keeping their word, acting on behalf of their clients, delivering on their contract, not simply lining their own pockets.<sup>30</sup> When considering the consequences, it is vitally important, normatively and empirically, to distinguish trust from trustworthiness. For example, investigative reports of corruption in government is likely to strengthen public feelings of mistrust.<sup>31</sup> But arguably if allegations are substantiated, critical citizens *should* become more wary of the dishonest authorities to hold them to account at the ballot box.<sup>32</sup>

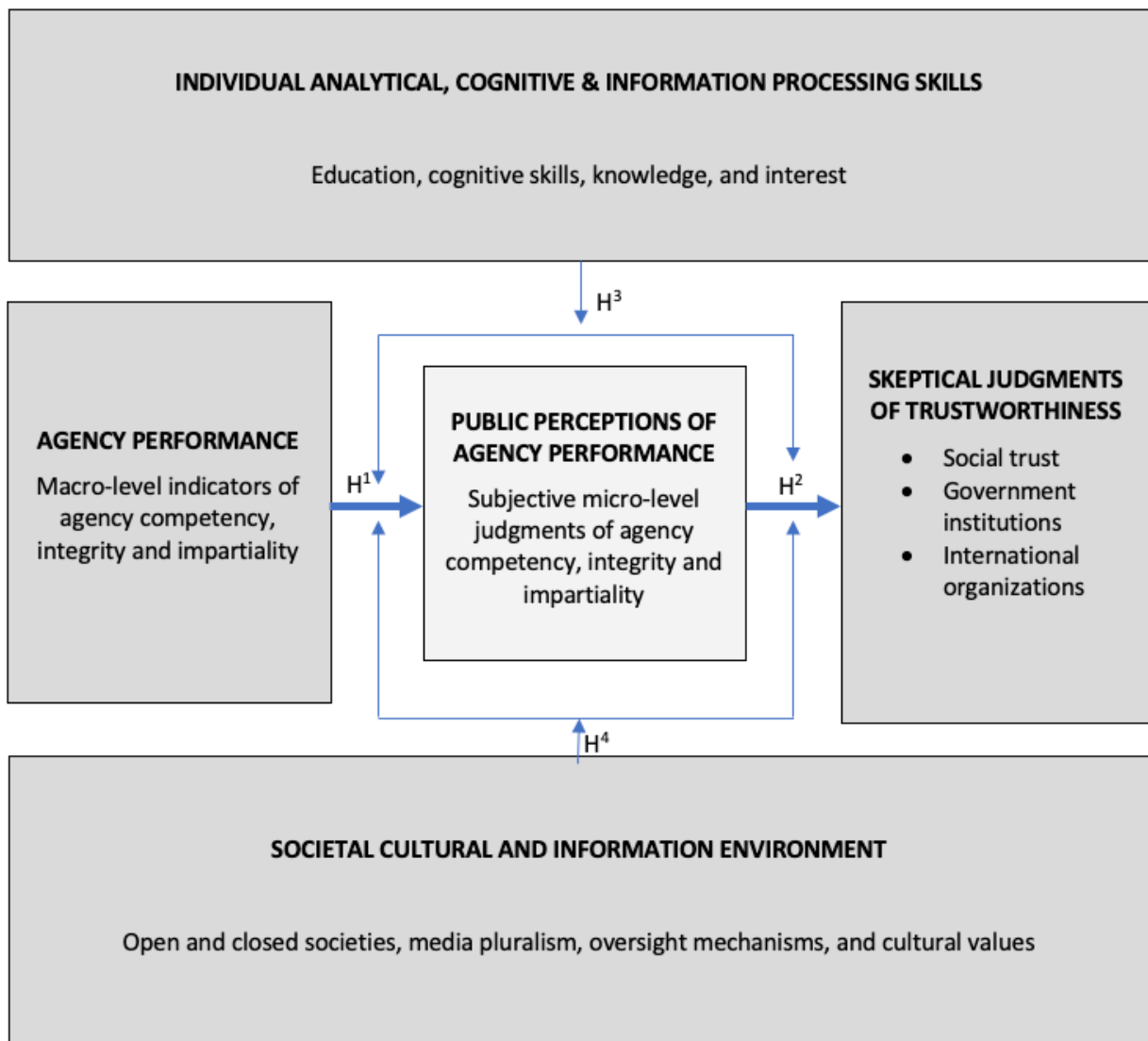
Unfortunately, perceptual bias in judgments of trustworthy relationships is common, where decision errors reflect a mismatch between assessments of the likely future actions of somebody (an individual agent) or something (a collective agency). People can make mistaken judgments by either being too *cynical* (mistrusting agents or agencies which perform well, like avoiding medical advice to take well-tested vaccines preventing childhood viruses) or else by being too *credulous* (by trusting agents or agencies which perform poorly, like supporting corrupt demagogues, dishonest swindlers, or repressive leaders). Both can be problematic for democracy by limiting vertical forms of electoral accountability, for example by voters failing to punish incompetent, dishonest and corrupt politicians at the polls, or by not rewarding effective and competent leaders dedicated to serve the public interest.

In learning whether the governing authorities are trustworthy or untrustworthy, journalism through the primary sources of mediated mass communications -- newspapers, radio and television, and the internet -- is widely expected to play a crucial intermediary role connecting citizens and the state. Direct personal experiences may shape perceptions of local authorities, for example, concerning



the welfare services offered for health care, housing, and education, or community policing and redevelopment. But few have the capacity to make informed judgments directly about the performance of national authorities based on day-to-day personal experiences and conversations, such as whether government leaders, political parties, and the courts act in ways which serve the public interest. Evaluations are especially hazardous when evaluating complex trade-off issues, under conditions of risk and uncertainty, and with abstract criteria such as the fiduciary competence, integrity, fairness, and impartiality of political authorities. Should elected leaders – or Big Oil or world markets - be blamed for high prices at the pump? Do candidates dissemble and lie or deliver on their campaign promises? Are public officials fair and impartial --or racist and corrupt?

**Figure 1: Heuristic model of skeptical evaluations of trustworthiness**



Source: Pippa Norris. 2022. In Praise of Skepticism. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



Therefore, the information environment from mediated and interpersonal communications can be expected to prime and frame how ordinary people evaluate how the authorities manage both the policy-making process and the delivery of public services, and hence expand the capacity of citizens to form rational judgments of their trustworthiness. This process is depicted in Figure 1.<sup>33</sup>

In this heuristic model, at individual (micro) level, accurate evaluations of trustworthiness are understood as those which reflect agency performance. The capacity of ordinary people to make these judgments are expected to reflect their prior reservoir of analytical, cognitive and information processing abilities and motivational interest. Cognitive skills have commonly been gauged by the proxy measure of levels of formal education. This has been found to be more strongly correlated with political knowledge than the effects of other socio-demographic characteristics such as gender/sex, age, and income/SES.<sup>34</sup> Cognitive skills, reasoning proficiencies, prior civic knowledge, and the motivation to follow public affairs can be expected to expand the capacity of citizens to understand complex policies and decision-making processes, informing the choice of candidates and political parties at the ballot box.<sup>35</sup> This process should facilitate awareness about the competency, integrity, and impartiality of candidates and political parties running for office and the record of governing authorities when delivering public goods and services, strengthening electoral accountability and avoiding the errors of both excessive cynical mistrust or credulous trust.<sup>36</sup>

### **1.1.3 Comparing open and closed societies**

In addition, previous studies deserve to be revisited because many previous survey-based studies of trust have been restricted to evidence in the United States, or else to cross-national survey data in similar Western liberal democracies. But media effects are likely to differ in open and closed societies.

Countries can be classified as closed societies where the state characteristically exerts control over the airwaves, disseminates misinformation, and limits news coverage and dissident voices critical of the authorities, exemplified by Putin's Russia and Xi's China. Less extreme cases include European societies like Hungary, Bulgaria and Greece, which international monitoring agencies identify growing restrictions on press freedom, as part of democratic backsliding.<sup>37</sup> By contrast, according to the Varieties of Democracy project, European states like Norway, Sweden and Germany can be categorized as more open societies, characterized by media pluralism, viewpoint diversity, freedom of expression, and an independent press with the capacity 'speak truth to power' and hold authorities to account.<sup>38</sup> Applying this classification, public perceptions of government trustworthiness (monitored in the World Values Surveys) have been observed to reflect objective performance indicators, such as rates of economic development and growth, and estimates of the quality of democratic governance, more closely in open than closed societies.<sup>39</sup>

In the light of these considerations, the study predicts that in open societies, characterized by two-sided forms of information, public judgments of trust in the authorities will be correlated more closely with independent performance indicators. By contrast, in closed societies with restrictions on press freedom, public trust in the authorities is expected to be correlated more weakly, and more positively, than independent performance indicators.

## 2 Concepts, Methods, and Data

For test these propositions, game theoretic approaches in behavioural economics, political communications, and social psychology have long examined the characteristics and determinants of trustworthiness, using lab experiments.<sup>40</sup> Yet it remains difficult to generalize from studies within one culture to human attitudes and behaviours in other environments. It is important to reexamine the survey evidence for the links connecting news media attention with judgments of the trustworthiness of the authorities in diverse contexts, comparing cross-national time-series survey data monitoring varied types of media landscapes, societal cultures, and types of regimes. Cross-national surveys allow broader patterns to be observed in diverse contexts. The research agenda using this method can be extended to understand whether information from the news media contributes towards the rationality of public evaluations about the *trustworthiness* of government agencies. This can be done by comparing citizen's trust attitudes, monitored in cross-national surveys, with objective independent indicators of institutional performance in diverse states and media systems, monitored by objective indices like official national statistics.<sup>41</sup>

Accordingly, to monitor public political trust this study draws upon individual-level data from the first two decades of the European Social Survey (ESS), conducted every two years from 2002-22.<sup>42</sup> Following the method used by Van der Meer and Van Erkel, trustworthiness is measured in parsimonious regression models as the residual error in how far selected governance performance indices predict observed levels of public trust in each country-year.<sup>43</sup> Indicators are derived from standard sources in the literature, such as from the World Development Indicators, the Varieties of Democracy project, and the World Bank Institute.

To measure trustworthiness, country-year measures of the public's political trust in each country-year of the ESS are matched with selected performance indices for both policy outputs (levels of economic development) and processes (the quality of good governance). Trustworthiness is estimated in parsimonious models as the residual error in how far selected process and economic policy performance indicators predict observed levels of public trust in political institutions. Both the size and direction of the residual are important for the interpretation. A positive residual indicates that the predicted value is too high, suggesting what can be conceptualized as '*credulous trust*', where the public expresses more faith in political institutions than their actual performance warrants. A negative residual indicates that trust is too low, reflecting what can be termed '*cynical mistrust*', where the public underestimates the honesty and integrity, effectiveness and competency, or impartiality and fairness of political institutions, compared with their actual performance. If the media environment plays an important role in this process, then credulous trust can be expected to be more widespread in closed societies, where states limit dissent and control the airwaves. And more rational trust, with smaller residual errors, can be expected in more open societies with a proliferation of information sources.

### 2.1 Individual-level data

To monitor trust attitudes towards institutional political authorities, the study draws upon the ESS as an academically driven cross-national survey conducted across Europe with cross-sectional samples. To preserve continuity over successive waves, this study compares 39 European societies across diverse sub-regions, types of media systems, historical legacies and contemporary regimes, membership of the European Union, and cultural traditions. To reduce continuity errors, this excludes surveys in countries contained infrequently in the time-series integrated dataset. Coverage in the integrated ESS dataset from all 10 rounds of the survey includes in total 467,636

respondents with 248 country-year observations. To maintain continuity over time, the ESS items are derived from the core questionnaire, including use and attention to a variety of media sources, and measures of institutional political trust.

### **2.1.1 Political trust**

The ESS includes a standard battery of institutional political trust towards authorities asked in each survey round, including 0-10 scales monitoring trust in the country's parliament and in the European parliament, the legal system, the police, politicians, and the United Nations.<sup>44</sup> Other studies have often limited the comparison by examining attitudes towards elected leaders, governments, or political parties, but this study examined attitudes towards several of the main institutions of national and European governance, since each of these could be important in how people form judgments of the authorities.

The six items were subject to principal component factor analysis, and they were found to fall into a single dimension. As a result, these items were summed into a single political institutional trust scale (Cronbach's Alpha=0.894), displaying a normal distribution. The index was standardized to a 0–100-point scale for descriptive statistics and converted for analysis to Z-scores standardized around the mean. Further robustness tests found that the ESS estimates for trust in the legal system and in political parties were extremely strongly correlated with equivalent measures matched to country-year in the European Values Survey/World Values Survey ( $R=0.789$  \*\*\* and  $0.876$ \*\*\* respectively), increasing confidence in the ESS measures.

### **2.1.2 Media exposure**

To measure individual-level media exposure, the ESS questions changed unfortunately during the series of rounds, reducing comparability over time. The ESS surveys from 2002 to 2010 asked separately about the respondent's time spent on an average weekday on six activities: 1) reading a newspaper, 2) reading about politics and current affairs, 3) watching TV news, politics and current affairs, 4) watching TV in general, 5) listening to news, politics and public affairs on the radio, and 6) listening to the radio in general. The impact of the amount of general media use for entertainment has been found to differ from exposure to news and public affairs.<sup>45</sup> Analysis in this study focused on the latter, since many media malaise theories emphasize the negative influence of this activity on political trust and civic engagement.<sup>46</sup>

By contrast, the ESS rounds of the questionnaire from 2016 to 2020 collapsed the previous news media battery into a single item, irrespective of the source, measuring the number of minutes spent watching, reading, or listening to news about politics and current affairs on a typical day. This development reflected the blending of legacy and digital media, where it becomes challenging to disaggregate specific sources. The number of minutes using the internet on a typical day was also monitored in the 2016 to 2020 rounds of the survey. Given discontinuity in the news media and internet exposure measures in the complete ESS series of rounds, comparisons over time are made by analysing the rounds from 2002 to 2010 and from 2016 to 2020.

## **2.2 Macro-level data**

For macro-level data, the performance of political institutions was monitored in terms of both their policy outputs, reflecting the capacity of the government to deliver effective public goods and services, such as managing macroeconomic growth and prosperity, as well as their procedural performance in the quality of democratic or 'good' governance.<sup>47</sup>

In terms of policy output, obviously the criterion for assessing performance depends upon expectations of the scope of government and issue saliency. For comparative studies, it is important to select types of bipartisan (vallance) issues which reflect a broad consensus as desirable goals in most countries. These are more appropriate than divisive issues of salience to a narrower segment of the electorate in particular countries. This study replicates previous performance-based evaluations of trust which have used measures such as the government's record in managing economic prosperity and growth, unemployment, and inflation. Internationally harmonized official macro-economic statistics are derived from the World Development Indicators.<sup>48</sup> Four annual series were selected and matched to the survey year and country: level of economic development (per capita GDP in purchasing power parity), rates of unemployment (as a proportion of the active labour force), inflation (the consumer price index), and rates of economic growth (changes in per capita GDP).

For process performance, the study used the World Bank Institutes' measures of the quality of 'good governance', developed by Daniel Kaufmann and Aart Kraay. These have aggregated cross-national annual data since 1996 from multiple sources to monitor six dimensions of governance: voice and accountability, regulatory quality, rule of law, control of corruption, government effectiveness, and political stability.<sup>49</sup> When tested, the data was found to fall into a single scale of 'good governance', so items were summed, and the scale included in the models.

For monitoring open and closed societies, the study draws on the Varieties of Democracy full dataset (V-Dem-14), with the country-year matched to the ESS survey round.<sup>50</sup> V-Dem estimates a Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information Index, designed to measure how far the government respects freedom of the press, and ordinary people have freedom to discuss political matters. V-Dem also generates several sub-indices, such as the degree of state censorship and media pluralism, which can be used to explore further.

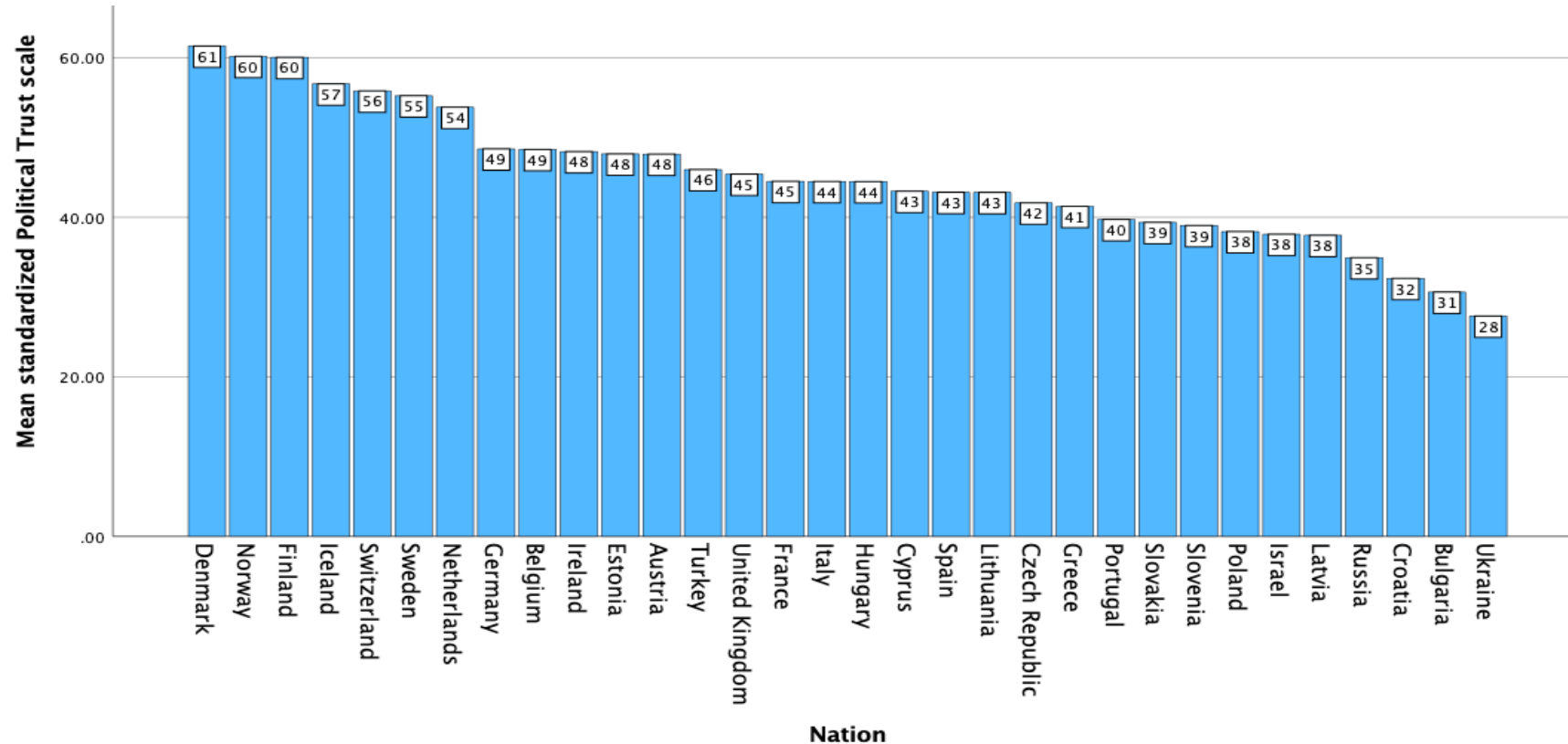
### 3 Results

Firstly, to look at the descriptive evidence, how does average public trust in political institutions vary across Europe during the last twenty years? As Figure 2 illustrates, the societies displaying the greatest trust and confidence in political institutions include affluent Nordic societies, long-established stable consensus democracies, and smaller welfare states, exemplified by Denmark, Norway, and Finland, as well as Switzerland and the Netherlands. These countries commonly rank highly within Europe and worldwide on many other civic attitudes and forms of political engagement, such as satisfaction with liberal democracy.<sup>51</sup>

The middle of the ranked spectrum on the trust scale includes a wide range of diverse societies from different European sub-regions, which share little in common in terms of levels of development, types of regimes and electoral systems, historical experiences of democracy, cultural values, and religious traditions.

By contrast, however, the cases where the public expresses minimal political trust in the authorities are several post-Communist societies in Central and Eastern Europe, including Poland, Latvia, Russia, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Ukraine, as well as Israel. There are substantial cross-national contrasts, between the most trusting societies (like Denmark) which are on average twice as likely to express confidence in political institutions as the least trusting (like Ukraine).

**Figure 2: Trust in Political Institutions, 32 European countries 2002-2020**



Cases weighted by All weight

**Notes:** “Using this card, please tell me on a score of 0-10 how much you personally trust each of the institutions I read out. 0 means you do not trust an institution at all, and 10 means you have complete trust. Firstly... ..politicians?...” The Trust in Political Institutions scale is the combined 6-item standardized (0-100-point) scores for trust in the country’s parliament, politicians, the legal system, the police, the European parliament and the United Nations across all rounds. (Cronbach Alpha=.870). **Source:** European Social Survey Integrated file rounds 1-10, 2002-2020.



**Figure 3: Observed trends in Trust in Political Institutions, 2002-2020**



**Notes:** “Using this card, please tell me on a score of 0-10 how much you personally trust each of the institutions I read out. 0 means you do not trust an institution at all, and 10 means you have complete trust. Firstly... ..politicians?” The Trust in Political Institutions scale is the combined 6-item standardized (0-100-point) scores for trust in the country’s parliament, politicians, the legal system, the police, the European parliament and the United Nations. (Cronbach Alpha=.870). **Source:** European Social Survey Integrated file rounds 1-10, 2002-2020.



Turning to trends in public opinion over time, Figure 3 illustrates the annual national scores on the political trust scale, without any controls. Ever since the Trilateral Commission report in 1975, there have been periodic waves of concern that trust and confidence in government has been eroding in the United States and Western Europe, engendering a predicted ‘crisis’ of liberal democracy.<sup>52</sup> The contemporary era sees numerous reports in the popular media, scholarship, and in international reports, which echo these anxieties. As Figure 3 illustrates, however, far from a steady secular erosion of political trust across Europe, still less any general ‘crisis’, in fact we can observe persistent national contrasts in levels of trust, diverse national trends, and a pattern of trendless longitudinal fluctuations around the mean. Thus, while political trust does seem to have fallen steadily over the years in Israel, Cyprus, and Italy, according to the ESS data, by contrast steady linear gains can be observed in Norway, Latvia, and the Netherlands. In other cases, more substantial trendless fluctuations of rising and falling trust in the authorities can be seen in Greece (with a major dip in 2010), Portugal, Ukraine, Spain, Iceland, and Hungary.<sup>53</sup>

The type of observed trends over time is critical for their interpretation. Long-term secular declines evident across similar societies over many decades point towards sociological explanations, such as structural demographic shifts in public opinion, as younger citizens gradually replace older generations in the population. Any sharper fluctuations observed over time within a particular country, however, suggest that potentially these may be a reaction to more specific historical events, such as the impact of President Trump’s claims of electoral fraud in the United States<sup>54</sup>, the 2008 recession and eurozone financial crisis in Spain and Greece<sup>55</sup>, a ‘rally-round-the-flag’ effect in response to the 2014 and 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine<sup>56</sup>, UK divisions over Brexit in 2016, the 2015 peak of the immigration crisis in Germany<sup>57</sup>, revelations about the 2022 ‘Qatargate’ high-level corruption scandal in the European parliament<sup>58</sup>, or handling the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in spring 2020.<sup>59</sup>

Certainly, specific events can be suggested to provide plausible narratives seeking to account for trends observed in each nation. The propositions explored in this study, however, suggest that cross-national trends in public trust reflect more general evaluations of the macro-economic policy and/or procedural performance of governing authorities. In this respect, trends in trust in the authorities should reflect their performance in managing national rates of unemployment and consumer prices, and perceptions of how government works in terms of corruption, effectiveness, and rule of law.

Table 1 presents the OLS linear regression models seeking to predict macro-level political trust. Model A shows the pooled model for all country-years in the ESS. Model B adds the measures of mean levels of exposure to news about politics and public affairs from newspapers, TV and radio broadcasting in the ESS from 2020-2010. Model C replicates the analysis with the summary ESS measure of exposure to politics and current affairs from all media sources.

**Table 1: Macro-level models predicting political trust**

	Model A 2002-2020				Model B 2002-2010				Model C 2016-2020			
	B	SE	Std. B	Sig.	B	SE	Std. B	Sig.	B	SE	Std. B	Sig.
(Constant)	33.3	1.413			12.50	4.22		0.003	24.70	2.97		<.001
<b>PROCESS &amp; POLICY PERFORMANCE</b>												
Good Governance index (WBI)	<b>1.50</b>	<b>0.140</b>	<b>0.60</b>	<b>0.001</b>	<b>1.57</b>	<b>0.21</b>	<b>0.69</b>	<b>&lt;.001</b>	<b>2.35</b>	<b>0.30</b>	<b>0.83</b>	<b>&lt;.001</b>
Economic development (WDI, pc GDP ppp )	<b>0.00</b>	<b>0.000</b>	<b>0.27</b>	<b>0.001</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>0.26</b>	<b>&lt;.001</b>	0.00	0.00	0.13	0.188
Economic growth (WDI, annual GDP)	0.13	0.090	0.05	0.170	<b>0.77</b>	<b>0.16</b>	<b>0.24</b>	<b>&lt;.001</b>	-0.13	0.12	-0.07	0.262
Inflation, WDI annual consumer prices)	0.13	0.129	0.04	0.301	0.11	0.18	0.08	0.251	<b>1.58</b>	<b>0.43</b>	<b>0.25</b>	<b>&lt;.001</b>
Unemployment, total (WDI/ILO % of total labor force)	<b>-0.21</b>	<b>0.091</b>	<b>-0.09</b>	<b>0.023</b>	0.21	0.14	0.02	0.673	0.13	0.19	0.05	0.073
<b>MEDIA EXPOSURE</b>												
Newspaper reading, politics/current affairs on av. Weekday (ESS)					<b>8.74</b>	<b>0.37</b>	<b>0.15</b>	<b>0.019</b>				
Radio listening, news/politics/current affairs on av weekday (ESS)					<b>-3.37</b>	<b>1.67</b>	<b>-0.12</b>	<b>0.038</b>				
TV watching, news/politics/current affairs on av weekday (ESS)					<b>5.67</b>	<b>2.34</b>	<b>0.15</b>	<b>0.017</b>				
News about politics & current affairs, watching, reading, listening (ESS)									<b>0.04</b>	<b>0.02</b>	<b>0.12</b>	<b>0.052</b>
N. observations (country-years)	248				122				77			
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.69				0.75				0.73			

**Note:** The dependent variable is the mean Political Trust scale standardized (0-100) per country-year.

**Source:** European Social Survey 2002-2020

The results in Model A pooled across all years demonstrates that political trust is predicted most strongly by public evaluations of the quality of the objective Good Governance Index, measuring dimensions such as the competence, integrity and stability of the authorities. As many others have reported, levels of corruption are closely tied to trust in government institutions, but the public trust also reflects other qualities of good governance.<sup>60</sup> Political trust in a country was also significantly but more weakly linked with indicators of government management of the economy, notably levels of economic development and unemployment, although growth and inflation were not significant predictors. One reason could be that the Consumer Price Index was relatively steady during the years under comparison, although high rates of unemployment were problematic and a salient issue on the policy agenda in many countries, especially in Southern Europe following the 2008 financial crisis.

Overall, the pooled performance model accounted for two-thirds of the variance in observed levels of political trust in any society. Model B adds the measures for disaggregated media exposure to politics and public affairs from 2002-2010, showing that newspaper reading and TV watching were both positively and significantly related to political trust, although listening to radio news proved negative. Overall, this lends partial confirmation of the Virtuous Circle thesis, demonstrating positive correlations between trust and the primary sources that most people report they use to get their political news, even after controlling for government performance. The reasons for the difference in broadcasting media remains somewhat puzzling, however, and requires further exploration. Finally, Model C shows similar positive relationships in recent years linking news exposure (from any media) to political trust. It is not possible to examine models directly across both series, however, due to the discontinuities in ESS measurement of media news exposure over successive waves.

Therefore, overall, the models in Table 1 suggest that several selected process and policy performance indicators, and exposure to the main legacy news sources, help to predict political trust in society, with good governance the strongest single factor in this relationship. How far is this pattern conditioned by the broader media landscape and freedom of the press? To examine this issue, trends over time in the observed levels of standardized political trust in European societies can be compared with the standardized residual errors from Model A, predicting levels of trust based on the quality of governance processes and the government's handling of key aspects of the economy. The solid red line is the standardized mean level of political trust observed in each country-year. The dotted black line represents the residual error from Model A. In the comparison, residual errors which are higher than the observed level of political trust can be understood to reflect 'credulous trust', where the public expresses greater trust in the authorities (for whatever reason) than would be expected from performance alone. If residual errors are lower than the observed level of political trust, this can be interpreted to reflect '*cynical mistrust*', where the public has less confidence in the authorities (for whatever reason) than would be expected from the performance indices alone.

Figure 4 presents the results where it can be observed that credulous trust is most evident in Russia and in Turkey (in the curtailed series of surveys), in Italy, and in Greece and in Hungary during the last decade. Of course, many sui generis factors could contribute towards these patterns, for example if citizens in these countries prioritized the government's handling of other non-economic issues, such as social welfare, immigration, globalization, climate change, or national defence and international security. The public could also trust the authorities for many other affective reasons, such as the nationalist appeal of a strongman leader, or feelings of identification with a populist

party in office. But most importantly, the Hungarian and Greek cases show rising levels of credulous trust occurred simultaneously with some of the most dramatic declines in freedom of expression during the last decade, as shown in Figure 5.

In Hungary, after Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's rise to power in 2010, international monitoring groups highlight steady deteriorations in press freedom, independence, and media pluralism. Reporters without Borders (RSF) report that Fidesz, the ruling party, now controls 80% of the country's media and the state has used harassment and smear attacks to undermine critical journalism.<sup>61</sup> Today Hungary ranks 85<sup>th</sup> worldwide in the RSF World Press Freedom index, down from 40<sup>th</sup> a decade earlier. In Greece, as well, there has been a substantial decline in freedom of the press during the last decade, with RSF reporting growing incidents of state surveillance against journalists, gag lawsuits and legal actions, and threats to the safety of journalists. In 2022 and 2023, the country ranked as the worst for media freedom in the European Union in the RSF World Press Freedom Index.<sup>62</sup> Yet in both cases growing state control of the news media and the suppression of dissent has been accompanied by rising levels of residual errors in public trust over and above that attributed to policy and process performance by the authorities.

This pattern is theorized to arise from the constraints on viewpoint diversity in closed societies. Citizens' judgments of the authorities can be expected to be more prone to error among those exposed to a single perspective, or 'one-sided' forms of messaging. This is most common in closed societies, exemplified by political propaganda and state censorship, where communication favors the authorities, restricting alternative views. The pro-government skew in media messages is likely to strengthen positive sentiments towards the authorities. Reliance on one-sided sources in closed societies, like state TV, will therefore generate both less informed evaluations, and more positive judgments about the trustworthiness of the authorities.

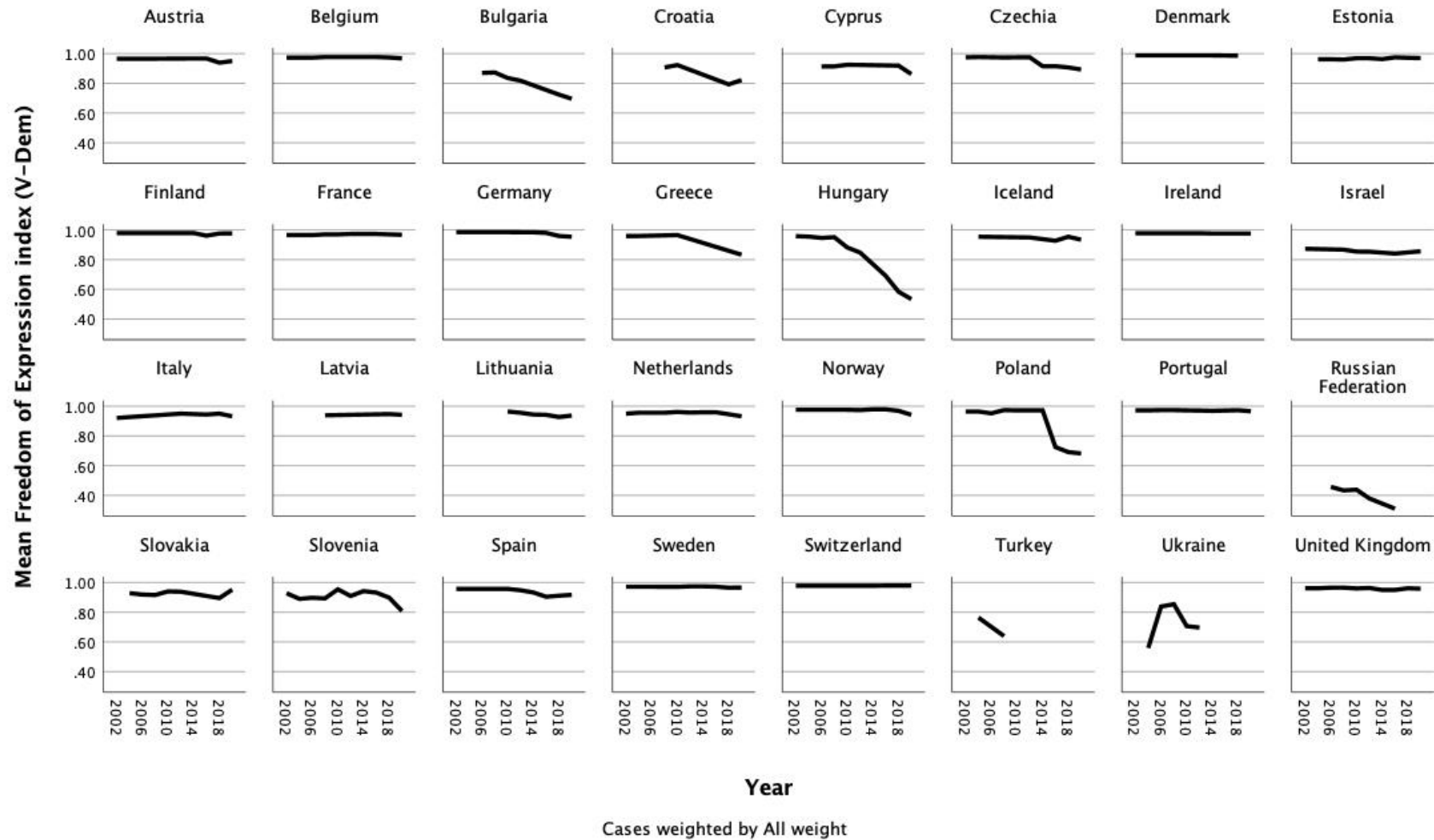
By contrast, the reasoning capacity and knowledge required for accurate judgments of political trustworthiness are predicted to be strengthened by exposure to alternative perspectives – or 'two-sided' forms of information characteristic of open societies where media news does not consistently favor the incumbent authorities. Two-sided news let viewers and readers weigh both critics and defenders of the authorities and thereby come to a more informed evaluation of the government's performance.<sup>63</sup> As Figure 4 illustrates, in many of the diverse countries which V-Dem rates as persistently high in freedom of expression and media pluralism during the last two decades, such as Sweden, Belgium, Finland, France, and Spain, the gap between observed trust and the residual errors from the performance indicator models are far smaller, suggesting the public has more accurate evaluations of the government's policy and procedural record. In a few open societies, however, such as the UK, Slovenia, Ireland, Austria, and the standardized residuals are lower than expected by performance alone, suggesting that the public is more cynical than would be predicted from the performance of the authorities alone. Moreover, Israel is something of an outlier, an open society with moderate levels of press freedom where the residuals can be observed to shift over time from a position of credulous trust to cynical mistrust. Other surveys in the country report similar trends.<sup>64</sup> It may be that this shift reflects growing tensions and conflict between Israeli authorities—the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary—which have brought about a decline in the public's confidence. Shifts in the party coalitions in power, reflecting deeper cleavages in society, may also be linked with these patterns.

**Figure 4: Errors in performance evaluations of trustworthy political institutions**



Notes: The solid red line represents the observed trends in political trust standardized around the mean (Z-scores). The black dotted line represents the standardized residual errors for models controlling for government policy and procedural performance in Table1 Model A. Negative residual errors below the observed red line suggest cynical mistrust compared with performance. Positive residual errors above the red line suggest credulous trust compared with performance. Source: European Social Survey Integrated file rounds 1-10, 2002-2020.

**Figure 5: Trends in Freedom of Expression 2002-2020**



Note: Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem 14) estimates for Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information Index for 32 European societies. Source: <https://www.v-dem.net/>



## Conclusions

The contributions of this study to this ongoing debate about the impact of the news media on political trust are threefold.

Firstly, the older evidence has been updated. The virtuous circle thesis was originally developed in the late-twentieth century, when the internet was in its infancy.<sup>65</sup> Since then, the rise of the digital era has obviously transformed the media landscape, by generating a proliferation of online platforms and apps, streaming audio-visual formats, and diverse sources of news and entertainment. This environment has vastly enlarged consumer choice. But it can also be expected to have reinforced and expanded the size of any gap dividing news avoiders, tuning out of coverage, from the news attentive.<sup>66</sup>

Secondly, the comparison also expanded the cross-national comparisons to understand the role of the news media beyond long-established democracies and open societies in the United States and Western Europe. This includes analysing the impact of diverse media systems in closed societies. International monitoring agencies report that several European states have increasingly restricted independent journalism and freedom of expression during recent decades, as exemplified by Hungary, Bulgaria, and Russia, but also with more modest erosions observed in Greece, Malta and Italy.<sup>67</sup>

Finally, most empirical research has conventionally focused on comparing trends in levels of citizen's feelings of *trust* towards national political institutions, such as political parties, governments, and parliaments. The conventional liberal normative framework assumes that trust is good for democracy and therefore more trust is even better, primarily by ensuring voluntary citizen compliance with the authorities. But this approach implicitly assumes, and cannot determine, the trustworthiness of the authorities.

Yet trusting and enabling dishonest scoundrels, corrupt rogues, and incompetent demagogues to gain elected office is deeply problematic for electoral accountability and democratic governance. It is therefore important to examine whether political trust is grounded in informed judgments of the trustworthy performance of the authorities, or else driven by irrational forces, such as partisan loyalties towards party leaders or deferential cultural attitudes towards the police which are acquired in early childhood.<sup>68</sup>

Overall, the study demonstrates further support for the Virtuous Circle thesis that exposure to European newspapers and television news usually bolsters feelings of trust in the authorities, rather than generating media malaise and cynicism. Even more importantly, the information environment, media pluralism, and press freedom in open societies commonly strengthens rational subjective judgments of the trustworthiness of the authorities, as monitored by selected objective performance indicators. Citizens can learn from many alternative views about the government's strengths and weaknesses in managing the economy and whether the authorities acted with integrity, competence, and fairness. By contrast, the information environment in closed societies, characterized by restrictions on independent journalism and public forms of dissent, and the use of state propaganda and control, strengthens more irrational subjective evaluations about the authorities, or credulous trust, where public opinion is more positive towards political institutions than predicted based on selected objective performance indices alone. Therefore, the study suggests that the news media can play a critical role which helps to strengthen electoral accountability and political legitimacy

in democratic states – while also functioning to reinforce public support for strongman leaders in authoritarian states.

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