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Reporting on Deliverable D2.1 – Report on the general dynamics of trust based on secondary data analysis

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Main author(s):	ÅAU: Henrik Serup Christensen, Janette Huttunen SWPS: Wit Hubert, Mikołaj Cześnik

	AUTH: Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos, Eftichia Teperoglou CSIC: Jens Carstens, Laura Morales, Carles Pamies, Chiao Li
Contributor(s):	
Approved by	Project Coordinator Prof. Dr. Michael Kaeding

Deliverable D2.1 – Report on the general dynamics of trust based on secondary data analysis

Executive Summary

Summary of context: The ActEU project ("Activating European Citizens' Trust in Times of Crises and Polarisation") has as one of its main missions to map and investigate persistent problems of declining political trust, legitimacy and representation in Europe. Within the overall project, work package 2 focuses on achieving a better understanding of the nature of these problems by examining citizens' political attitudes. This report provides a comprehensive and systematic overview of the nature, extent and evolution of the crisis of political trust throughout the European Union (EU) and the United Kingdom (UK) since the early 2000s.

Added value and summary of Deliverable 2.1: There are numerous academic publications and policy reports examining at length political trust, its multiple facets as well as its overtime evolution. The key innovations of this report are:

1) *We provide a systematic overview of the quality of the existing comparative cross-national data that allows to monitor mid- and long-term developments in political trust in a multilevel governance setting;*
2) *We systematically consider the latent structure or dimensionality of political trust, thus enquiring whether there is a single underlying political orientation vis à vis political institutions and actors regardless of the political level in which there are operating or whether citizens make distinctions between EU and national level institutions and actors;*
3) *We systematically map the trends in political trust for all available harmonised items since the early 2000s for all countries that have been an EU member state between 2004 and 2021, and we do so for EU political institutions and for national political institutions and actors; and*
4) *We assess which trends are common and which ones are not, thus allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the magnitude, extent and direction of the crisis in political trust of European democracies.*

Key findings and conclusions: First, although the scholarly literature on political trust, mistrust and distrust is very rich and discusses thoroughly conceptual nuances and distinctions, the available cross-national and over-time empirical data is still very standard in the way these concepts are measured. Most of the available comparative survey time series focus on standard survey questions that evaluate political trust towards an object of interest with traditional question wording and focus on the intensity of such trust. Mistrust and distrust as differentiated angles are not properly captured by existing EU-wide surveys.

Second, the availability of survey data to properly examine political trust across multiple levels of government (EU, national and subnational) is extremely limited, as key survey infrastructures do not tend to include enough survey items for all levels of government nor to consistently include the same items across survey years/waves. There is particularly a

dearth of sufficient time series for political trust towards subnational (local or regional) institutions and actors. When laudable efforts to post-harmonize datasets have been made by academics, they do not always systematically include all the items of political trust available in the original datasets.

Third, despite the limitations in the evidence base, the analyses presented in this report demonstrate that – unlike what has been suggested in previous research – political trust is not fully a unidimensional orientation. We find evidence pointing to citizens making important distinctions between the trust they place in EU institutions and the one placed in national institutions. We also find evidence of some country-specific variation of the way in which political trust in one level of government moulds political trust in the other level of government.

Fourth, while there are undoubtedly many countries where trust in EU-level and national-level institutions has been steadily decreasing since the early 2000s, we find that many (in some cases most) countries display trendless fluctuations, a u-shaped trend of decline with full or partial recovery and in a few cases, even a linear trend of increasing trust. In fact, linearly decreasing patterns are the least common, though many countries display more cyclical trends of decline with some (partial or total) recovery. Our findings highlight the importance of properly appreciating the degree and nature of cross-national variation in developments in political trust.

Finally, we find that over-time trends tend to cluster regionally within the EU, with countries that are culturally, politically and socio-economically more similar displaying more comparable trends. This points to macro-level economic, political and social developments that vary regionally within the EU that deserve further examination.

Policy recommendations: Following these findings, our report makes two core recommendations for EU-level policy. First, it is imperative that we improve the evidence base on political trust. We recommend improving the systematic collection of survey items in existing social science survey research data infrastructures funded by the EU (notably, the Eurobarometer, the European Quality of Life Survey and the European Social Survey), as well as supporting existing social science research infrastructures (such as the social science data archives grouped within CESSDA) to undertake systematic and comprehensive high-quality data post-harmonisation of historical time series. The European Commission (notably DG Research and Innovation and the European Research Executive Agency) should consider facilitating coordination and cooperation discussions across these three survey infrastructures to improve the coverage and innovation of the existing evidence base, as well as ear-marked funding for data post-harmonisation by social science research infrastructures within future Framework Programmes.

Second, we recommend that future policy-level discussions within the European Commission and the European Parliament (EP) of how to confront the crisis in political trust in the EU pays detailed attention to the considerable cross-national differences in the magnitude and trend of that crisis, such that countries with less favourable situations and where we can see systematic problems of political trust that are worsening receive the attention that they deserve from policy-makers. Innovative experimental interventions could be designed perhaps in collaboration between the Joint Research Centre and DG IDEA to assess pathways to success in improving citizens' political trust.

Contents

Tables

Figures

1 Introduction to the report

Henrik Serup Christensen and Janette Huttunen

Political trust is a central part of the ongoing debate on the state of contemporary representative democracies. It is traditionally believed that it is beneficial for the political system when citizens have high levels of trust in political institutions and actors. By increasing the subjective legitimacy of the political system, high levels of trust facilitate effective implementation of political decisions and that citizens comply with the law, even in times of turmoil (Besley and Dray, 2024; Exadaktylos and Zahariadis, 2014; Marien and Hooghe, 2011; Ouattara and van Der Meer, 2023). High levels of political trust may therefore be considered a key component in sustaining the proper functioning of representative democracy.

Several studies have tried to identify trends in political trust and their causes and consequences (Armingeon and Guthmann, 2014; Crozier et al., 1975; Dalton, 2004; Dassonneville and McAllister, 2021; Dellmuth, 2024; Devine and Valgarðsson, 2023; Norris, 1999, 2011; van der Meer and van Erkel, 2024). There are clear differences in views on both directions of developments and their implications. At first, scholars saw a decline in trust, which was considered an ominous sign of representative democracies being unable to maintain the confidence of their citizens (Crozier et al., 1975). Later contributions were less gloomy and claimed that lower trust could even be beneficial for democracy since critical citizens help keep decision-makers accountable (Norris, 1999; Rosanvallon, 2008). Even more important for the present purposes, more recent studies examining a broader range of survey research even question whether there is a uniform decline in political trust (Devine and Valgarðsson, 2023; Norris, 2011; van der Meer and van Erkel, 2024). Rather than a steady decline across countries, these studies find that in most countries, what we see are often trendless fluctuations without any discernible trend. All of this shows that despite several decades of research, there is still no agreement on developments in political trust or the implications for democracy.

These issues are particularly important in contemporary Europe, where representative democracies have transformed profoundly due to macrotrends such as modernization, globalization, and Europeanization. Furthermore, recent decades have witnessed several major political and economic crises that go hand in hand with increasing polarization of opinions and attitudes concerning key policy areas. The deepening integration in the EU entails that it can no longer be taken for granted that only national political actors and institutions are affected by such events. Recent studies have turned to examining political trust in the EU as a specific topic (Brosius et al., 2019; Harteveld et al., 2013; Muñoz et al., 2011; Persson et al., 2019). Although some of these studies specifically examine the link between trust in national and European institutions and actors, most of the literature assumes that political trust is one-dimensional, meaning that it remains unclear whether political trust in European-level actors and institutions follows a similar path or has distinct trends.

All of this entails that there is still a need to examine trends in political across EU member states to discern the extent to which the developments may be said to constitute a problem for European democracy at both national and European levels of governance.

In this report, we map developments in political trust at European and national levels of government in the 27 EU member states and the UK between 2004–2021. We do so primarily with the help of the Harmonised Eurobarometer data (Russo and Bräutigam, 2023) since this includes indicators on trust in institutions and actors at both the national levels and European levels of governance. This is complemented with the European Social Survey to map developments for national-level actors and institutions.

We in this report specifically address the following three research questions:

- Are there uniform developments in political trust across all countries?
- Are there clusters of countries with similar developments in political trust?
- Do the developments in political trust differ between European and national levels of governance?

To achieve these aims, Ch. 2 presents an overview of the state-of-the-art concerning conceptual and empirical work on political trust. The aim is here both to present the key conceptual distinctions that are found in the literature on political trust and introduce the key debates concerning developments and their implications that the extant literature involves. Based on these discussions, we identify the issues that we address in this report.

Following this, Ch. 3 presents an overview of the sources of data that are available for examining trust in both national and European level actors. While there are today several sources of survey data available, there are large discrepancies on time spans, what actors are covered, and how comparable the survey items are. Most importantly for our purposes, few of the available sources of data offer comparable data on trust in actors at both the European and national levels of government. For this reason, it is difficult to find suitable data for our purposes. We in the end settled on using the Harmonised Eurobarometer Data and the European Social Survey since this combination of cross-national surveys offers the best possibilities for examining trust in both national and European actors for a longer time span.

The following three chapters provide an empirical assessment of developments in political trust. First, Ch. 4 will present analyses of the dimensionality of political trust when considering items covering both European and national level actors and institutions. Although a lack of suitable indicators covering a sufficient time span makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions, the available evidence suggest that it is important to distinguish between political trust at national and European levels. While there are commonalities between the two dimensions, they seem to form relatively independent analytical dimensions that do not necessarily covary over time.

Ch. 5 provides an overview of developments in political trust at the European level before Ch. 6 examines developments for national-level actors and institutions. While there are central differences in what institutions are in focus, the aims for these chapters are similar: to establish what trends in political trust are discernible and whether there are differences in these across countries. The procedures for doing this are explained in more detail in Ch. 5. While we do not here have an explanatory ambition, we will nonetheless connect the developments to major events such as the financial crisis after 2008 and the Covid-19 pandemic, since several studies show that these have implications for levels and trajectories of political trust (Armingeon and Guthmann, 2014; Exadaktylos and Zahariadis, 2014;

Kroknes et al., 2015; Rump and Zwiener-Collins, 2021). Nevertheless, since these events affected countries to varying extent, it is likely that the impact on levels of trust also differ. Furthermore, the impact may differ between the national and European levels of governance since their roles differed markedly during these events.

In the final Ch. 7, we draw conclusions based on the results from the preceding chapters and make policy recommendations that can reinforce the study of political trust in the future.

2 State-of-the art of research on political trust

Wit Hubert and Mikołaj Cześnik

2.1 Introduction

As one of the co-authors of the "Trust at Risk" report writes in the prologue, "(...) human beings are naturally trusting. Indeed, we tend to trust beyond the point at which evidence and rational considerations would incline us to distrust" (Hosking, 2017:15). This fragility and volatility of the trust relationship is one of the central concepts of many social science disciplines.

Political trust is a key multifaceted concept in modern democracies, reflecting citizens' trust in political institutions and actors. It signifies the legitimacy, reliability, and effectiveness of these actors and is rooted in broader sociological and political theories supporting social cohesion and cooperation. Scholars have different perspectives on political trust. Russell J. Dalton (2004) links it to political behaviour and public opinion, Pippa Norris (1999) examines it through democratic mechanisms and civic engagement, and Robert D. Putnam (2000) explores its link to social capital and civic engagement. After explaining why this trust is important to researchers and practitioners, we present a discussion of the characteristics of political trust. Here, we shift the current debate on its definitions and develop the concepts of distrust and mistrust. Political trust operates at many levels of governance, including EU, national, and regional/local levels. Citizens form trust orientations based on evaluations of institutions and actors at each level, highlighting their ability to recognise nuances in governance. Therefore, this chapter devotes a relevant section to the dimensionality of trust and levels of trust. In democratic societies, political trust legitimises power, facilitates governance, and promotes civic engagement. Trust in leaders and institutions promotes compliance with the law and reduces the need for coercion, maintaining social order. However, these trends vary not only spatially but also over time. The issue of changing political trust concludes this chapter to introduce the empirical parts of this report.

2.2 Why trust is important

Political trust, i.e. the trust of citizens in the politicians, government, and other institutions, fulfils several important functions in non-democratic, democratic, and intermediate systems. A trusting public is described as a desirable advantage for a whole range of reasons, from better political stability to effective governance. In the following section, we examine the functioning of political trust and present arguments suggesting that the amount of trust increases the stability of the political system. One of these elements can be seen as the fundamental function that political trust can provide: legitimation of power (Easton, 1965, 1975). It is widely accepted that citizens' trust is instrumental to make governments of any hierarchy of government and any political regime legitimate. When citizens trust their political leaders and institutions, they are more likely to consider the government as legitimate and worthy of support. This fosters compliance with laws and regulations and, thereby, social order and containing the pressure that should be applied by the coercive arm

of the administration for enforcing the government's decisions (Dann, 2022; Levi and Stoker, 2000) In democracies, political trust is supposed to be the main indicator, if not the only indicator, of the legitimacy of political institutions and the regime itself (Turper and Aarts, 2017). High overall trust means that citizens regard the system as fair and compliant to be obeyed, and this legitimacy is considered as indispensable for the survival and consolidation of democratic regimes (Turper and Aarts, 2017). Trust in political institutions facilitates the process of governance by promoting cooperation between the public and the government. High levels of political trust reduce the transaction costs associated with implementing policies and programs, as trusted governments face less resistance and scepticism from citizens (Hetherington, 1998). Political trust acts as a "reservoir of support" (Devine, 2024) that enables governments to effectively implement policies and maintain stability. This voluntary compliance oils the wheels of governance and expands the range of policies available to policymakers (Dann, 2022). Many researchers point out that political trust is a catalyst for political participation and civic engagement. Putnam (2000) long ago observed that people who trust their government are more likely to vote, discuss politics, and participate in civic activities. People with higher levels of political trust are also more likely to engage in institutionalised forms of political participation, especially voting (Devine, 2024; Turper and Aarts, 2017) and civic engagement, as well as to support politicians in their work (Devine, 2024; Easton, 1975).

From the literature, two further functionality scenarios for specific aspects of political trust and the determinants of socio-economic life can be extracted: (A) Preferences in terms of discrete policies, such as climate or migration crisis, are affected by citizens' trust in power and institutions. With higher political trust comes more pronounced support for policies (Dann, 2022; Devine, 2024). (B) Political trust may also be positively correlated with the economic performance of countries or regions. According to many researchers, trust (including political trust) reduces uncertainty and risk associated with investments, both domestic and foreign, fostering an environment conducive to business activity (Knack and Keefer, 1997).

2.2.1 Political trust and legitimacy

Political trust and legitimacy of power are inextricable concepts that can govern the staying power of political systems. Civic confidence refers to citizens' belief in political institutions such as the government, legislature, and political parties, whereas legitimacy refers to whether the population regards the political authority and rightfulness of these institutions to exercise control over them. Political trust is also important to the legitimacy of political institutions and political systems. Trust and legitimacy reinforce each other in a virtuous cycle: When citizens trust their political institutions, they are more likely to see them as legitimate and worthy of support (Devine, 2024; Turper and Aarts, 2015), and when they perceive institutions as legitimate, they are more likely to trust them (Arif and Dutta, 2024; Devine, 2024). Conversely, a decline in trust can erode the legitimacy of institutions, leading to a vicious cycle of declining trust and legitimacy (Devine, 2024; Mohamad and Othmani, 2020). Political trust can be seen as a kind of political bank account that stores up goodwill for institutions so that they can tolerate temporary setbacks or even short-term unpopularity of policies or political leaders (Turper and Aarts, 2015). In contrast, low civic confidence can undercut the legitimacy of institutions and lead to more widespread noncompliance with laws and policies, lower voter turnout, and even instability (Devine, 2024).

Stable and effective political systems need to be seen as legitimate. Legitimate institutions make better claims to political power because their authority to govern is viewed as rightful, and these institutions have a greater chance of inspiring citizen compliance with their decisions and actions (Arif and Dutta, 2024). Legitimacy can be based on different grounds – democratic processes, the rule of law, or ability to deliver effective governance and public services (Arif and Dutta, 2024; Mohamad and Othmani, 2020). Moreover, trust can act as a mediator between legitimacy and effective governance. While legitimacy is essential for institutions to exercise power effectively, trust plays a crucial role in enabling legitimacy to translate into better governance outcomes (Arif and Dutta, 2024). When citizens trust their political institutions, they are more likely to comply with policies and support the implementation of governance initiatives, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of those institutions (Arif and Dutta, 2024; Mohamad and Othmani, 2020). Political trust promotes perceptions of legitimacy in institutions, while legitimacy promotes civic confidence in a virtuous circle. Maintaining high levels of confidence and legitimacy is vital to ensuring citizens' compliance with the covenant's requirements, the optimal functioning of the polity, and ultimately, the stability of the whole political system.

2.3 Characteristics of political trust

Political trust is embedded within a wider conceptualization of 'trust'. No other term is as frequently used in sociology and political science as the term 'trust' (Cook, 2001). Besides boosting the scientific vocabulary, the widespread usage of the term also situates it in a broader public debate. The term is, therefore, not without significance in wider everyday circulation or great importance for political discourses. In its most general terms (both in the scientific and in the ordinary sense), the idea of trust relates to the belief in the ability, benevolence, and competence of an interaction (person/institution) (Mayer et al., 1995). From the perspective of interpersonal relations to larger societal institutions (such as the state or municipality), trust becomes a key quantity that underpins the social fabric, the political organisation, and the economic exchange (Sztompka, 1999). It is not only about expectations passively waiting to be fulfilled but also an active quality that influences behaviour, attitudes, and social interactions. Trust is a multi-faceted concept, that has been studied in many different disciplines. It develops on different levels and several dimensions. Sociologically, trust is a glue that binds society together and supports cooperation. Politically, it relates to expectations that people form about their government. Trust in government, therefore, encompasses both the institutional structures of authority and the individuals occupying various office positions (Hardin, 2002). Trust becomes a key factor in the formation of more engaged community life and civic engagement (Putnam, 2000). Trust is also fundamental for the functioning of economic systems and social institutions, thus routinely underpinning the work of markets (Fukuyama, 1995). As a general systems theory approach would show, it is vital to the modern social system (Luhmann, 1979).

Trust can take many forms of which we propose to identify two basic ones here. One is interpersonal trust, which concerns relations between two or several people; the other is institutional trust, which concerns people's confidence in institutions or organisations. Emerging from these different forms of trust, trust depends on other trust forms. It develops within a broader societal context, which embeds and supports political trust.

Interpersonal trust and political trust are therefore very much linked, as the two form an intricate and dynamic relationship (Dinesen et al., 2022). However, as Russell Hardin (2002)

reminds us, "confidence" rather than "trust" should be used to refer to people's attitude towards the government, since what underlies trust towards government is not personal relationships but confidence in its competence and integrity. Moreover, Hardin (2002) argues that "political confidence" is more accurately a relation of citizens towards their government, addressed to competence rather than personal trust. We nevertheless here use the term political trust throughout.

Political trust is a multidimensional concept at the core of the social sciences to identify citizens' confidence in basic political institutions and actors. It is a socially shared belief in the legitimacy, reliability, and effectiveness of political institutions and figures, involving evaluations of core institutions regarding their perceived reliability, neutrality, effectiveness, transparency, and responsiveness to the diversity of views. Political trust, therefore, represents a part of institutional trust, which directly relates to the stability and functionality of political institutions as citizens' confidence in the legitimacy, reliability, and effectiveness of political institutions and actors that mediate the relationship between the people and the democratic ideals that underpin their political environment.

Political trust plays an important role in our understanding of the sustainability of democratic societies. Initially, despite many scholarly efforts to explore and conceptualise this important form of trust, there has been a lack of an agreed definition of political trust, and studies of its origins, levels, manifestations, and consequences rarely rely on pre-defined categories. As a result, political trust has remained conceptually scattered, and little attention has been paid to understanding its underlying dimensions. Engaging with conceptualisations of political trust and its dimensions therefore provides a basis for exploring the role of political trust as a proxy for democratic government and as an indicator of civic participation. The following sections review elite and public conceptualisations of political trust, highlight the similarities and differences among alternative approaches, and provide an overview of this key political phenomenon.

2.3.1 Conceptualisations of political trust

The study of political trust is often undertaken in the field of political science and is of great importance to the stability and functionality of democratic societies. It encompasses attitudes and perceptions of political authorities' integrity, competence, and responsiveness. Various social scientists have paid attention to different aspects of political trust when creating a definition of it: Focusing on political behaviour and public opinion, Dalton's (2004) work particularly delves into trust in government. Norris (1999) suggests that political trust should be studied by examining of political institutions, such as government, parliament, or the courts, and to perceptions of their effectiveness and fairness. She emphasises that low levels of political trust can lead to an increase in political cynicism and a weakening of citizens' engagement in democratic processes. Putnam (2000), in his extensive and significant studies of social capital, has emphasized the interplay between civic engagement and political trust. The need to understand the importance of social capital, trust, and political participation is also emphasized by Hooghe and Stolle (2003). Their research highlights the need to understand the mechanisms by which interpersonal trust intersects with political trust and what implications this has for the functioning of civil society in democratic systems. Social differentiation and social inequality are important dimensions of social life that shape political trust (Uslaner, 2002). In his view, trust is rooted in relatively stable social norms that

are not susceptible to economic and political dynamics. Uslaner (2002) suggests that societies with high levels of moral trust are more cooperative and show greater tolerance.

It seems that the sociopolitical perspective can be supplemented by looking at political trust from a micro perspective or otherwise using psychological concepts. Psychological trust theories explore the cognitive and emotional dimensions of trust formation. Hetherington (1998) emphasizes the role of emotional responses and affective evaluations in shaping political trust. This perspective contends that citizens' emotions and attitudes towards political entities significantly shape their trust levels. Researchers categorize political trust into affective and cognitive trust (Schnaudt and Popa, 2023). Affective trust pertains to the emotional attachment citizens have towards political institutions and actors, indicating a sense of affiliation and personal connection. It primarily stems from nonrational sentiments such as loyalty, solidarity, and belief in the benevolence of political elites. In contrast, cognitive trust relies on rational assessments of institutions' capabilities and the likelihood of them fulfilling citizens' expectations.

2.3.2 Mistrust and distrust

Mistrust and distrust are separate concepts from trust in the context of politics. Mistrust expresses a wary, questioning, and critical attitude towards politicians and government, while distrust represents more settled beliefs that politicians are untrustworthy and that they are acting in a way that is not in the best interests of citizens (Bunting et al., 2021). Mistrust can have positive consequences in a democracy by securing accountability and encouraging citizens to be informed and vigilant (Bunting et al., 2021) or by motivating greater accountability and transparency in governance (Bertsou, 2019). By contrast, high levels of distrust are imagined posing a threat, potentially leading to alienation and disengagement from government policies and recommendations (Jennings et al., 2021). This indicates that people perceive and express mistrust and distrust differently. Mistrust is typically related to concerns over whether politicians can be relied upon to behave in predictable and trustworthy ways, that is, if they will keep their promises. Distrust stems from perceptions that politicians are intrinsically committed to their own interests rather than those of citizens and express doubts about politicians' competence (Winsvold et al., 2023). The phenomenon of distrust in contemporary sociological discussions is closely related to political polarization. As societies become increasingly polarized, individuals may develop a sense of distrust of political opponents, institutions, or media popular among people with different political views (Iyengar and Krupenkin, 2018).

Many researchers believe that the Internet and its technologies are an environment conducive to the development of a culture of distrust. The development of digital media (media convergence, i.e., the likening of old and new media) is often seen as a major factor in the formation of political trust. The Internet and the forms of journalism occurring in it are changing the way institutions and politicians communicate. Distrust of media sources due to misinformation, bias, or perceived agendas can contribute to broader political distrust (Zollmann, 2017). Distrust can spread through social networks like Facebook or Twitter/X. Negative experiences, or a negative assessment of phenomena or posts, may affect the level of trust of people who are recipients of messages on social networks (Uslaner, 2017b). However, there are researchers who point out that technological determinism (the development of new media) is not a sufficient element to develop distrust. Norris (2011) discusses how economic and cultural globalization can contribute to a sense of distrust among

citizens. Political participants often notice the tension between local problems and global phenomena.

Distrust in politics may be institutional in nature. Here, researchers focus on how distrust can arise in the context of the functioning of specific institutions (e.g., parliament, municipal council, courts) or more broadly, when we are dealing with multi-level management. Institutional distrust can arise from citizens' perceived corruption, lack of transparency, or instances of ineffective policies (e.g., inefficient or inexpedient spending of budget funds). In many analyses, institutional distrust strongly correlates with political trust (Levi and Stoker, 2000; Schoene, 2019).

As this shows, there are several variables describing the variability of distrust between different social categories. Social scientists consider the role of identity in shaping political trust. Dimensions of individuals' social identity such as race, gender, and class are related to the level of trust and distrust in political institutions (Mason, 2018).

2.4 Dimensionality of trust (levels and types)

The concept of political trust is considered multidimensional, although empirical work frequently does not take this adequately into account. First, the differentiating dimensions are the levels of government within political systems. It may be that level of trust varies between European, national, and regional/local levels. Second, political trust is typologized according to the criteria for assessing the actions of institutions and politicians. Various studies have explored the specificity of political trust at each level and proposed typologies to address its diverse manifestations.

The concept of political trust is sometimes recognized as multifaceted, with distinctions observed across different tiers of governance, including the European Union (EU), national, and regional/local levels. Some studies have delved into the specificity of political trust at each level and have proposed typologies aimed at encompassing its diverse manifestations. Conceptually, political trust has a level-specific nature. It means that individuals formulate distinct trust orientations towards disparate levels of governance based on their appraisals of the respective institutions and actors (Proszowska et al., 2022). Citizens generally evaluate each governmental level with the unique situation in mind, considering that level's own merits and performance in isolation from others (Hooghe and Marien, 2013; Proszowska et al., 2022). This level-specific trait is ascribed to citizens' ability to distinguish the nuances and realities of governance at different institutional levels (Proszowska et al., 2022). For instance, at the EU level, trust in EU institutions is shaped by factors such as perceived efficacy, receptiveness, and ideological variance of politicians observed at national and local levels (Proszowska et al., 2022). Political trust should therefore be differentiated by the level of power exercised. An example is a situation in which a sense of belonging to a local community may serve as a "safe haven" for individuals who experience distrust of national institutions, leading to differences in levels of trust in local and central government (Hegewald, 2024). However, it is likely that the dimensionalities and gauging of political trust vary according to different forms of government and cultural contexts because of different ideas of trust, which may lead to different forms and levels of political trust (Schneider, 2017). Nevertheless, most empirical work operationalizes political trust by focusing exclusively on a single level of government, thereby making it difficult to understand the differences that may exist between these levels.

Different typologies have been proposed to deal with the complex characteristics of politically embedded trust. These are often based on citizens' perceptions of trustworthiness and its evaluations. The first proposed criterion for categorizing political trust is that it can be regarded as an evaluative tool for assessing the conditional nature of the political system. The Evaluation Approach means that political trust is perceived as a contextual and relational and assessment based on citizens' evaluations of whether governmental actions promote their political values and goals, making trust assessments subjectively rational (Proszowska et al., 2022). As part of the system evaluation, citizens can criticize dimensions such as competence, benevolence, and integrity (Grimmelikhuijsen and Knies, 2017). Here, researchers propose to define these criteria as competence (ability or aptitude for completing tasks, jobs, missions, and goals), benevolence (concern for citizens' interests and well-being), and integrity (commitment to principles, values, and the rule of law). The following trustworthiness dimensions also appear in scientific studies: authenticity and responsiveness (Listhaug, 1995; Winsvold et al., 2023). All the above dimensions form the basis for citizens' trust in political actors and institutions. Political trust as a form of policy evaluation may also be categorised with strategic, moral or deliberative judgments (Fisher et al., 2010). The first form (strategic trust judgments) is based on perceived competence and effectiveness. However, moral trust judgments are simply socially shared values and principles. The last of this typology (deliberative trust judgments) includes those forms of political expression that are transparent and based on inclusive decision-making processes. More recent research has developed a typology of political trustees characterised by their specific combinations of felt trust, distrust, and mistrust (Weinberg et al., 2023). Based on questionnaires collected from a representative sample of Norwegians, these researchers develop a typology for assessing political trust, considering four main criteria: predictability, internal commitment, competence, and responsiveness of politicians. The research shows that predictability is the most frequently cited trust-building factor, while lack of internal commitment is the most frequently cited reason for lack of trust (Weinberg et al., 2023).

2.5 Developments in trust over time

Political trust is widely regarded as a key foundation for the legitimacy and stability of democratic governance. Furthermore, if trust is found to be in decline, then the implications for democracy are likely to be severe. Based on these considerations, tracking trends and developments in political trust is an important step in understanding the present state of democracy in Europe. At the outset, it is worth mentioning that current political science and sociological studies present a nuanced picture of political trust in Europe, with divergent perspectives on whether it is growing or declining over time. In general, the ongoing scholarly and expert discussion does not make it clear whether democracies are experiencing a uniform decline in the level of political trust (the democracy crisis thesis), or whether it is mainly trendless fluctuations in most countries (Devine and Valgarðsson, 2023). The following are selected concepts presenting the current state of the art.

Dawson and Krakoff (2024) challenge the common hypothesis of declining political trust by adopting the “critical citizens” theory, which suggests that scepticism about political institutions may indicate active engagement rather than lack of engagement. Their re-examination of the dynamics of political trust requires a more understanding approach that goes beyond simple indicators of trust levels. There are several factors contextualizing the trends in political trust observed in Europe. Van Ham et al. (2023) invited authors dissecting myths about the legitimacy crisis in a collective work they edited. They contend that theories

about declining legitimacy are as old as democracy itself, but that representative democracy nonetheless still exists, and empirical evidence for a decline of political support in established democracies is limited, questionable, or absent (van Ham et al., 2023). The authors emphasized the importance of understanding cross-country differences and historical trends in determining the dynamics of trust levels. This contextualization is crucial to interpreting fluctuations in political trust and spotting underlying patterns. Without it, it is difficult to prove empirical evidence for a secular decline of political support in established democracies is limited, questionable, or absent. Norris (2011) contributes to this debate by revisiting the concepts of critical citizens and the democratic deficit. Her work highlights the interplay between citizen expectations and political outcomes, suggesting that perceptions of trustworthiness are contingent on the fulfilment of democratic ideals. The framework clarifies the complex relationship between political trust and democratic legitimacy.

The dynamics of trends can be determined through longitudinal analysis, which offer valuable insights into trends and trajectories of political trust. An example of such analysis is the work of Pharr, Putnam, and Dalton (2000). These researchers used a historical perspective to look at the functioning of the institutions of the democratic system. Their longitudinal approach reveals persistent challenges to political trust, emphasizing the need for continued efforts to address underlying issues. Only the perspective of a quarter-century allows for the hypothesis of a decline in trust in democratic institutions. The analysis of the longitudinal perspective has found its contenders. Van der Meer and van Erkel (2024), for example, advocate moving beyond the debate on the crisis of political trust by using residual analysis to understand trust trends. Their methodological innovation (validated in an analysis of Eurobarometer data) allows for a more nuanced study of trust dynamics. This approach facilitates a deeper understanding of the underlying factors affecting political trust in Europe. First and foremost, it allows us to separate declines that can reasonably be expected as a reflection of declining political trustworthiness and thereby reflect critical citizens who monitor their democratic institutions from downward trends that are not warranted by democratic performance and thereby suggest a more fundamental disconnect between citizens and their democratic institutions (van der Meer and van Erkel, 2024).

According to the above, the dynamics of political trust in Europe is a multifaceted phenomenon characterized by both stability and volatility and, consequently, complexity. While many researchers have identified a decline in political trust, others argue that trends in political trust are mainly trendless fluctuations (Norris, 2011). In her view, political trust globally and in Europe is largely shaped by many factors, including the economic situation, political crises, a country's political culture, and technological and media developments. Longitudinal analyses and contextualization are essential for explaining trust trends and understanding the underlying dynamics shaping political trust in Europe.

Despite several efforts, there is no agreement on the developments in political trust in Europe, especially when we consider that these trends may differ across countries and depending on level of government.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter on political trust discusses how it forms the central function of democratic societies. This theoretical introduction had ambitions to bring out the fact that political trust is not some ethereal concept but a very basic constitutive element underpinning the legitimacy and effectiveness of the political institution. In the most general sense trust builds

a cooperative relationship between citizens and institutions, making governance easier and encouraging civic engagement. If the citizens see the political institutions as legitimate and trustworthy, there will be a better chance of compliance with the law and support for initiatives taken by the government, thus increasing social order and stability. Attention has been called to this regard of the complex relationship between trust and political legitimacy. In this view, the nature of trust is identified as a general inventory of support for institutions that transfers to institutional legitimacy. In this respect, higher levels of trust underscore institutional legitimacy, thus building up a cycle of reinforcement through which both trust and legitimacy benefit from one another. Conversely, low levels of trust can lead to a decline in institutional legitimacy.

In the future, it will be important to take into consideration how political trust operates as a dynamic attribute that is bound to fluctuate from one level to another depending on social, economic, and technological influences. Increased uncertainty, resulting from rapid technological development and global change, poses new challenges to trust in EU institutions. Crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change, migration crises, or economic instability are factors redefining the relationship between citizens and power. Developments in political trust are often circular in nature and citizens' declared distrust may be a manifestation of rising expectations. However, there is no theoretical or empirical basis for ignoring the signals of declining political trust, either towards individual areas of government or towards areas of Europe. It is therefore crucial, as the author of the Epilogue suggests in the report "Trust at Risk", to create tools (through scenario thinking) to catch weak signals of impending crises (Hiltunen, 2017).

The following chapters examine developments in political trust at both national and European levels of government with the aim of exploring whether there is a general decline in political trust, or developments are more complex, as recent studies suggest. To this end, the following chapter explores the available sources of data for this endeavour.

3. Data on developments in trust

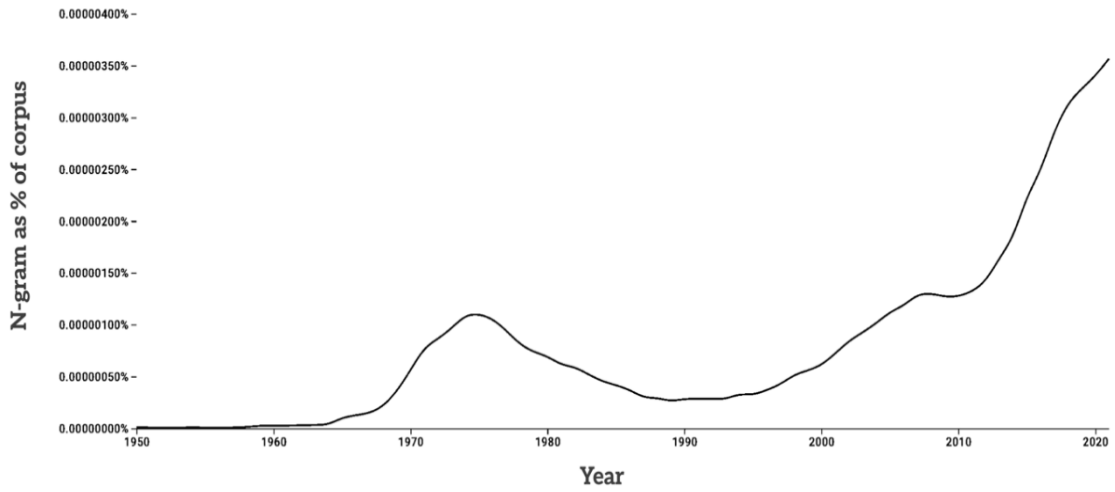
Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou

3.1. Introduction

As illustrated in the preceding chapter, scholarly interest in political trust is driven mainly by a common premise: that increased levels of trust are *normatively* desirable due to their interrelation with several positive societal-level outcomes. In the literature's enduring classics, these outcomes relate to economic development (Fukuyama, 1995; North, 1990), international peace (Russett et al., 1995), and the quality of institutions (Levi, 1998; Putnam, 1993; Rothstein, 2011). At the same time, a notion of tapering levels of political trust in advanced democracies after the 1970s, drove the political science community to track and examine the public opinion on political trust more closely.

If one could argue that interest in political trust waned, in relative terms, in the late 1980s (see Figure 1), the second half of the 2010s has seen a vigorous revival of interest in the concept, antecedents, and effects of political trust, presumably due to the tumultuous political impact of the global financial crisis, the Euro crisis, and a series of electoral shocks across Western Democracies that followed. What has received, comparatively, less theoretical and empirical scrutiny despite its importance is the *measurement* of political trust.

Figure 1. Trends in scholarly attention to political trust, 1950–2022. (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou)



Note: as captured by Google Books Ngram Viewer (https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=Political+Trust&year_start=1950&year_end=2022&corpus=en&smoothing=3).

This chapter aims to provide an overview of current debates and points of agreement in the literature, as well as to highlight the ensuing gaps. It proceeds as follows. The next section provides a broad overview of the evolution of the concept of political trust, *from the perspective of its implications for measurement*. Relatedly, the third section reviews the diverse analytical frameworks that have developed to empirically capture trust and study its potential effects and precursors. Special emphasis is placed on advances and developments in the use and availability of survey data for political trust. The concluding section of this chapter concludes with a summary and recommendations for future research.

3.2. The evolution of the concept of political trust

3.2.1 The lay of the land

Political trust is an inherently interdisciplinary concept, spanning philosophy, political science, sociology, psychology, and economics (see Simon, 2020; Svendsen and Svendsen, 2009; Zmerli and Hooghe, 2013). Much of the existing differences in terms of covariates of interest and theoretical perspectives stem in part from their distinct disciplinary origins. Thus, while economics, sociology, and social psychology might be particularly interested in *social trust*, political science is mostly intrigued by documenting and explaining levels of *political trust*.

At the same time, these disciplines have held different conceptual centres of gravity in explaining variation in trust (see for a discussion Norris, 2022). While psychology has conceptualized trust as a personality trait and sought to investigate its correlation with other psychological characteristics (e.g., Mondak and Canache, 2017), sociology has long privileged a sociological understanding of political trust in which patterns of trust are a function of cultural legacies (Sztompka, 1999). This line of inquiry has also paid special attention to the role of political values (Inglehart, 1999). One the other end, economics and political economy have interpreted trust as a function of economic output, conceptualizing it as running tally of evaluations. Political science, for its part, has focused primarily on developing and testing institutionalist frameworks to assess the correlations between levels of trust, institutional capacity, representation, and political events.

While these approaches might seem contradictory at a first glance, that need not necessarily be the case. Within political science, they have inspired different research hypotheses over the years (see for example Harteveld et al., 2013). Recent literature, leveraging fine-grained panel data has attempted to arbitrate between the relative importance of those different perspectives. Devine and Valgarðsson (2023) have demonstrated that political trust is mostly stable within-individuals across time. Still, at the margins, fluctuations can be detected, because of political events (see also Hegewald & Schraff, 2024).

Thus, for most political research purposes, at the simplest level, trust can be conceived as a *relational concept*, denoting the amount of confidence a *unit of analysis* (individual, social group, or country) extends towards an *object of trust* (a different individual, social group, or institution). In other words, political scientists are primarily interested in citizens' trust in a set of political institutions or actors (target objects of trust), that may vary over time, across objects, or between units of analysis.

In this framework, political trust becomes key indicator of political system support (Easton, 1975) and is viewed as a marker of *political legitimacy* (see, for example, Putnam, 2000). As such, it is closely related to other concepts of political support. Norris, in her seminal work (2011), aims to conceptually disentangle the different indicators of political support and order them in a continuum ranging from most *specific* to most *diffuse,* by drawing on the *Eastonian* tradition. According to Norris, political trust sits near the middle of the continuum, being more specific than performance evaluations of institutions, but less specific, and thus more volatile, than regime evaluations, acceptance of core polity values, and feelings of identity/attachment towards the polity.

Yet, political trust remains conceptually and empirically distinct to other political system support measures (Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou, 2024). In this area of the literature, *political trust* is used interchangeably with the terms *institutional trust* and *confidence*. It is this specific conceptualization of political trust, and its underlying conceptual apparatus, that motivates this current report to provide an in-depth look into the trends of trust in national and EU-level institutions.

In the paragraphs below, we review some ongoing discussions on the concept of political trust, before proceeding to the discussion of best practices around measuring it.

3.2.2 The dimensionality of trust

We have previously stressed the conceptual distinction between political/institutional trust, where objects of political trust correspond to political institutions, and social/generalized trust, where the target object relates to society and people in general, noting its alignment with disciplinary borders. While, at the conceptual level, the distinction is big enough to delineate different research fields and warrant diverging theoretical perspectives, several research papers, books, and edited volumes, have investigated them jointly. At the same time, several studies have, on different grounds, argued for the inherent multidimensionality (or unidimensionality) of political trust, spurring vigorous debates (see Hooghe, 2011), with mixed, and often competing findings.

Dimensionality, in statistical parlance, refers to the intercorrelations between a series of variables. High levels of correlation are taken to imply a common underlying construct. A claim of uni-/multi-dimensionality thus has serious implications for measurement. It's important, at this point, to recognize that the term *dimensionality* has been utilized with slightly different meanings, which we briefly review below.

3.2.2.1 The relationship between political and social trust

Empirically, the distinction between social and political trust has given rise to a scholarly debate (for an overview, see Uslaner, 2015). While the correlation between the two concepts is not surprising, their direction of causality is conceptually not entirely clear and empirically difficult to disentangle. Different accounts can be provided to see generalized trust as the source of political trust, and vice versa, or they can be viewed as part of the same underlying attitudinal predisposition. While the scholarly debate goes back decades, the most recent contributions, employing panel data, demonstrate that institutional-political trust exerts a *causal effect* on generalized-social trust (Dinesen et al., 2022). The vindication of the top-down perspective in the dimensionality discussion further underlines the importance of seriously analysing political trust as a scientific pursuit.

3.2.2.2 The between-objects dimensionality

A related discussion can be raised around the dimensionality of political trust. Motivated by high levels of intercorrelations, an argument can be made for combining responses to items for multiple political trust objects. While several methodological issues, like the assumptions of equal weights among all items in composite indices remain relevant, the most interesting discussion for the ActEU project may be around the existence of a common underlying trust construct across different levels of governance. In other words, while existing studies have examined the correlations between national-level institutions and social trust, the intercorrelations between local, national, and supranational (EU-level) objects of trust is an open question to which this report will turn to in the next section.

3.2.2.3 Trust, mistrust, and distrust

More recent, and more impactful for measurement purposes, the conceptual distinction between trust, mistrust, and distrust has occupied political science for long. Beyond the potential normative consequences for developing political theories and policy recommendations, such a distinction might have implications for measuring too. While, at a conceptual level, this distinction pits the absence of trust against the existence of a cynical predisposition, most existing contributions have operationalized them as different points in the scale of a common item. Recent theoretical contributions have argued in favour of distinguishing them more explicitly (Bertsou, 2019; Norris, 2022). In that case, the (multi-)dimensionality of trust no longer refers to the correlations between different objects, necessarily, but in different dimensions of the concept within the same objects. Most recent work in this direction (see Jennings et al., 2021) has investigated how questions attempting to distinguish those different varieties of trust matter for behaviour, by creating instruments that combine different object of trust within each different trust dimension.

3.3 Analytical approaches to investigating political trust

The preceding section provided a short description of the broad conceptual differences around the notion of political trust, organized primarily based on their disciplinary affiliations. While a detailed survey of all different theoretical accounts and their respective varieties is beyond the scope and aim of this report, it's helpful to distinguish between the main methodological approaches to studying trust empirically.

Much in line with the disciplinary differentiations in conceptualizing and theorizing around trust, different scientific fields have relied on different methodological paradigms. Economics and political psychology have a long tradition in setting up experimental designs to measure trust and its downstream effects in behaviour, with special interest in reciprocity effects and social-economic cooperation. These traditions reach back decades, with seminal trust game being a consistent point of reference (Berg et al., 1995). In economics too, researchers have leveraged the utility-maximization hypothesis and methodological individualism to derive utility functions and test them experimentally, merging the study of trust with game theory to more closely probe the micro-foundations of political trust (e.g., Witteloostuijn, 2003). While the literature has scrutinized and refined those first approaches, over the years, they continue to share a common understanding and measurement approach to trust, and have, with few exceptions focused mostly on social trust.

Experimental designs are growing in popularity in political science and form a core part of the ActEU data gathering effort. Moreover, given the interest in documenting and understanding the differentiated associations that diverse national contexts might have with levels and trends of political trust, and the difficulty in designing experiments with adequate external validity, the literature around political trust rests primarily on *survey data*. As such, it has relied on *self-reported* (political) trust (see Uslaner, 2017a).

Comparative political science has long relied on the big cross-country survey projects. Since this is the prime interest of our report, in what follows we will unpack the methodological literature around measuring political trust from a *survey research perspective*. The potential equivalence of self-reported survey measures to behaviour-induced, indirect, measures have been closely investigated and has directly informed best practices that we review below (Uslaner, 2017a). This shall be achieved in two ways. First, we will survey the scholarly literature to try to synthesize existing insights around measuring trust. In a second step, we will map and explore how the main cross-country survey projects have (or have not) integrated political trust into their item instruments.

3.3.1 The current state of the art in measuring trust

In contrast to the steady rise and overwhelming volume of research papers with a substantive focus on trust, methodological literature has been relatively scarce, with often mixed findings. Moreover, a building consensus has slowly formed around key aspects of measuring trust in surveys. We will begin by considering the characteristics of questions that might be more conducive to higher-quality data.

3.3.1.1 The number of items

To measure trust, researchers can rely on either a single question item (per object) or multiple questions aiming to capture the same underlying construct. The general consensus among the psychometric community tends to prefer multi-item indices over single-item measures, and research in trust points in the same direction (Castro et al., 2023). By asking respondents to express their trust, in this case, more than once, and averaging across those items, they can reduce bias caused by measurement artifacts. Moreover, developing, validating, and administering large instruments for scaling is associated with considerable costs both up-front for the validation stage, and additionally at each round of fielding, to support the extra survey space.

3.3.1.2 Question Characteristics

Question characteristics refer to the sum of decisions around the formulation and implementation of a question in a survey. They are not insignificant, and can influence the quality of data gathered, on several dimensions, including item non-response, reliability, and validity (see Schaeffer and Dykema, 2020). The leading premise relates to simplifying the cognitive process of respondents to elicit responses that most closely match their underlying attitudes (see Tourangeau et al., 2000). This begins with the formulation of the question itself.

3.3.1.3 Item Wording

The discussion around item wording for trust items has benefited from the debate between direct and indirect measurements of trust that we touched upon earlier. While most survey projects rely on some version of the "How much do you trust…. [object of trust]" they differ in

terms of generality, by referring (or not) to a specific repertoire of actions for which one would extend trust. By specifying the scenario (Bauer & Freitag, 2017), responses elicited might increase the correlation between direct and indirect measures. Moreover, for the aim of assessing the legitimacy of a political institution or actor, generality might be more of a feature and not a bug; by allowing us to gauge the overall attitude a respondent might hold towards an object of trust. More extensive, direct comparisons of those possible combinations of item wordings need to be experimentally assessed and assessed for their measurement properties.

3.3.1.4 Response Categories

Measurement instruments of trust vary also in terms of the offered response categories. The most common distinction is between dichotomous (e.g., yes/no) answer formats and continuous scales (e.g., 0 no trust, 10 complete trust). While the vigorous debate around the respective merits of each response format was more ambivalent a few years back (Uslaner, 2015), the literature in trust, mirroring the general direction of survey methodology findings (Schaeffer and Dykema, 2020), seems to have settled on preferring continuous scales to allow respondents to map their attitude into the offered response options. By more closely representing the nature of the underlying attitude, the 11-point scale, paired with a minimally balanced question wording, is demonstrated to result in increased measurement validity (Lundmark et al., 2016).

3.3.1.5 Estimation

After briefly reviewing the current debates and points of agreement in the literature on measuring trust from a questionnaire design perspective, it is crucial to not sidestep the importance of other methodological decisions that follow the design of a survey instrument.

In this aspect, decisions relating to fieldwork, like random sampling versus opt-in panels, diverging sampling frames between project waves and participating countries, and modes of data collection, can reduce the ability of the data to provide accurate population inferences, and are differentially associated with measures of data quality. Recent contributions (Kołczyńska et al., 2024) have tried to adjust for such difference in data collection by leveraging advances in Item Response Theory (ITR). Relatedly, van der Meer and van Erkel (2024) have advocated a model-based analysis to distinguish between trustworthiness and trust.

These approaches, however, rely on common modeling assumptions, or necessitate substantive a-priori knowledge of the determinants of trust towards the object of interest. More importantly, however, they demand dense country-wave timeseries data. The availability of those is the topic of the next section.

3.3.2 Mapping the availability of cross-sectional, longitudinal data on political trust in the EU

Despite the emerging framework on best practices for measuring trust, researchers drawing on secondary data sources find themselves with a limited set of different formulations that they can use for research. Below we present the *unique variants* of political trust items present in cross-national survey projects in European countries between 2004–2021. The temporal span corresponds to the research aims and scope of the ActEU project. The authors of this chapter conducted a systematic review of existing databases to identify and map political

trust items for different sets of institutions. Our principal aims were to map the number of items available for different objects of political trust across time.

3.3.2.1 The existing question formats

Before presenting the availability of items in the survey projects under consideration, it is worth noting the considerable variation in question characteristics employed in those surveys. Paired with other methodological differences, like sampling procedures, the potential impact of item wording, response dimension, and response categories might have on response distributions, pose a threat to the comparability of estimates obtained from different projects.

These surveys, while, attempting to measure the same underlying dimension, trust towards sets of objects, often rely on questions with different response dimensions, polarity, and scale lengths. Often, survey projects may employ a different combination of question characteristics between different objects in the same survey. By systematically reviewing the survey documentation for the available survey waves of those projects between 2004 and 2022, we were able to identify 12 *unique combinations* of response dimensions, polarity, response categories, and whether they follow an item-specific or agree/disagree format. More specifically, we in this chapter examined the Eurobarometer (EB), the European Social Survey (ESS), the European Election Studies (EES), the European Values Study (EVS), the European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS), and the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP).

Table 1. Overview of unique survey questions in selected survey projects across different objects of trust, 2004–2021. (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou)

Source	Type of Question	Response Dimension	Response Format	Agree/Disagree or Item-Specific	Question Wording	Response Categories
European Social Survey	Evaluation of target object	Intensity	Unipolar Ordered Selection	Item Specific	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.	0 No trust at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Complete trust

Source	Type of Question	Response Dimension	Response Format	Agree/Disagree or Item-Specific	Question Wording	Response Categories
European Quality of Life Survey	Evaluation of target object	Intensity	Unipolar Ordered Selection	Item Specific	Please tell me how much you personally trust each of the following institutions 1 do not trust at all 10 trust completely	1 Do not trust 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Completely trust
Eurobarometer	Evaluation of target object	Presence of a Quality	Yes/No	Item Specific	I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain institutions. For each of the following institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it.	1. Tend to trust 2. Tend not to trust
European Values Survey	Evaluation of target object	Intensity	Unipolar Ordered Selection	Item Specific	Please look at this card and tell me, for each item listed, how much confidence you have in them, is it a great deal, quite a lot, not very much or none at all?	1.A great deal 2. Quite a lot 3. Not very much 4. None at all
European Election Study 2009	Evaluation of target object	Agreement	Bipolar Ordered Selection	Agree/Disagree	For each of the following propositions, please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements. " You trust the institutions of the European Union" Do you 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'neither agree nor disagree', 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree	1. Strongly agree 2. Strongly disagree 3.Neither agree nor disagree 4. Disagree 5. Strongly disagree
European Election Study 2014	Evaluation of target object	Intensity	Unipolar Ordered Selection	Item Specific	For each of the following statements, please tell me to what extent it corresponds or not to your attitude or opinion. You trust the…	1.Yes, totally 2. Yes, somewhat 3. No, not really 4. No, not at all

Source	Type of Question	Response Dimension	Response Format	Agree/Disagree or Item-Specific	Question Wording	Response Categories
European Election Study 2019	Evaluation of target object	Intensity	Unipolar Ordered Selection	Item Specific	For each of the following statements, please tell me to what extent it corresponds or not to your attitude or opinion…	1. Yes, totally 2. Yes, somewhat 3. Neither trust or distrust 4. No, not really 5. No, not at all
ISSP 2004	Evaluation of target object	Frequency	Ordered selection (with relative frequency categories)	Agree/Disagree	To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? 'Most of the time we can trust people in government to do what is right	1. Strongly agree 2. Agree 3. Neither agree nor disagree 4. Disagree 5. Strongly disagree
ISSP 2004	Evaluation of target object	Frequency	Ordered selection (with relative frequency categories)	Item Specific	Generally speaking, would you say that people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?	1. People can almost always be trusted 2. People can usually be trusted 3. You usually can't be too careful in dealing with people 4. You almost always can't be too careful in dealing with people
ISSP 2006	Evaluation of target object	Frequency	Bipolar Ordered Selection	Agree/Disagree	Please tick one box on each line to show how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements. 'Most civil servants can be trusted to do what is best for the country' "There are only a few people I can trust completely"	1. Strongly agree 2. Agree 3. Neither agree nor disagree 4. Disagree 5. Strongly disagree
ISSP 2008	Evaluation of target object	Intensity	Unipolar Ordered Selection	Item Specific	How much confidence do you have in …Parliament	1. Complete confidence 2. A great deal of confidence 3. Some confidence 4. Very little confidence 5. No confidence at all 8. Can't choose

Source	Type of Question	Response Dimension	Response Format	Agree/Disagree or Item-Specific	Question Wording	Response Categories
ISSP 2010	Evaluation of target object	Frequency	Bipolar Ordered Selection	Agree/Disagree	To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Most of the time we can trust people in government to do what is right Most politicians are in politics only for what they can get out of it personally	1. Strongly Agree 2. Agree 3. Neither Agree nor Disagree 4. Disagree 5. Strongly Disagree

Note: *Some of these items are used for more than one object in multiple survey projects and survey waves, while others are not.*

It is not possible to comment on the relative strengths and weaknesses of each combination, as they have not been directly evaluated against each other. Moreover, recognizing the inherent heterogeneity in existing data sets for measuring trust highlights the difficulties facing researchers when deciding which data set to rely upon. While this question might in part be conditional on the specific aims of a research question, availability of the item, in consistent formulation, is a crucial part of that decision. The next section will map the presence of political trust objects in comparative survey projects fielded in European countries.

3.3.2.2 The availability of political trust items in cross-national survey projects in Europe 2004–2022

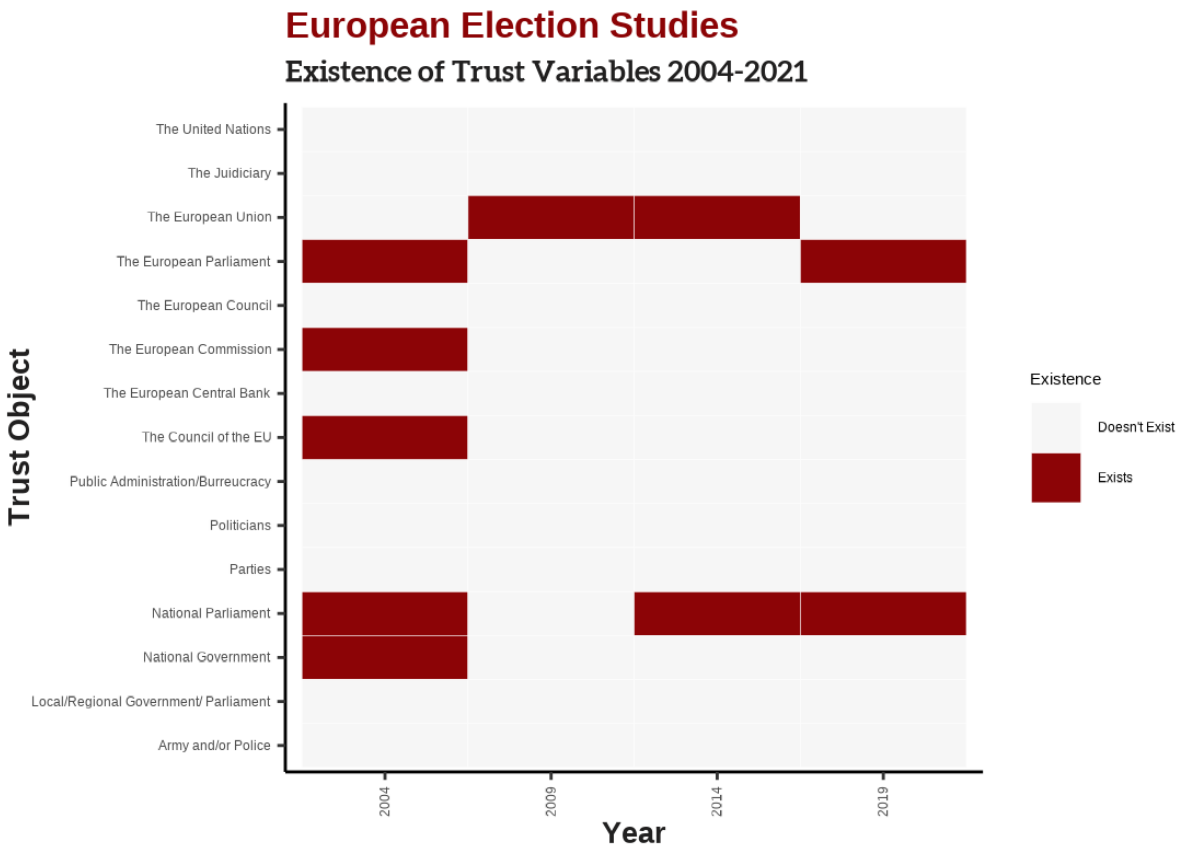
Despite differences in operationalizing political trust between survey projects, the availability for each target object varies greatly across projects and over time. These international survey projects have overlapping thematic scope, but their core interest often diverge. Thus, besides the data quality perspective, item availability is a separate and key factor in selecting which data to analyse. This section provides an overview of the existence of trust items for political institutions, construed to refer to objects relating to the legislative, executive, or judicial branch, between 2004 and 2022 in those survey projects.

Based on this overview, we find items that belong to a standard core of political trust to be present with greater frequency across all projects. This core includes items that intend to capture self-reported trust towards the main institutions of liberal democracy (such as the country's parliament, government political parties, and the supranational institutions), and is included in most surveys. A second outer circle includes questions about political trust in non-representative institutions such as the legal system, the police, and the public administration among others. The availability of items that belong to the latter group seem to largely hinge on the research aims of each survey. Moreover, each project follows different fielding intervals, which, combined with the (non-)availability of each object of trust between project waves, creates diverging patterns in data availability.

Starting with EES, Figure 2 shows that the post-electoral surveys conducted after each European Parliament election (four such surveys in the period under study) focus mostly on

the national parliament, with several interchanging objects that refer to the EU present across waves.

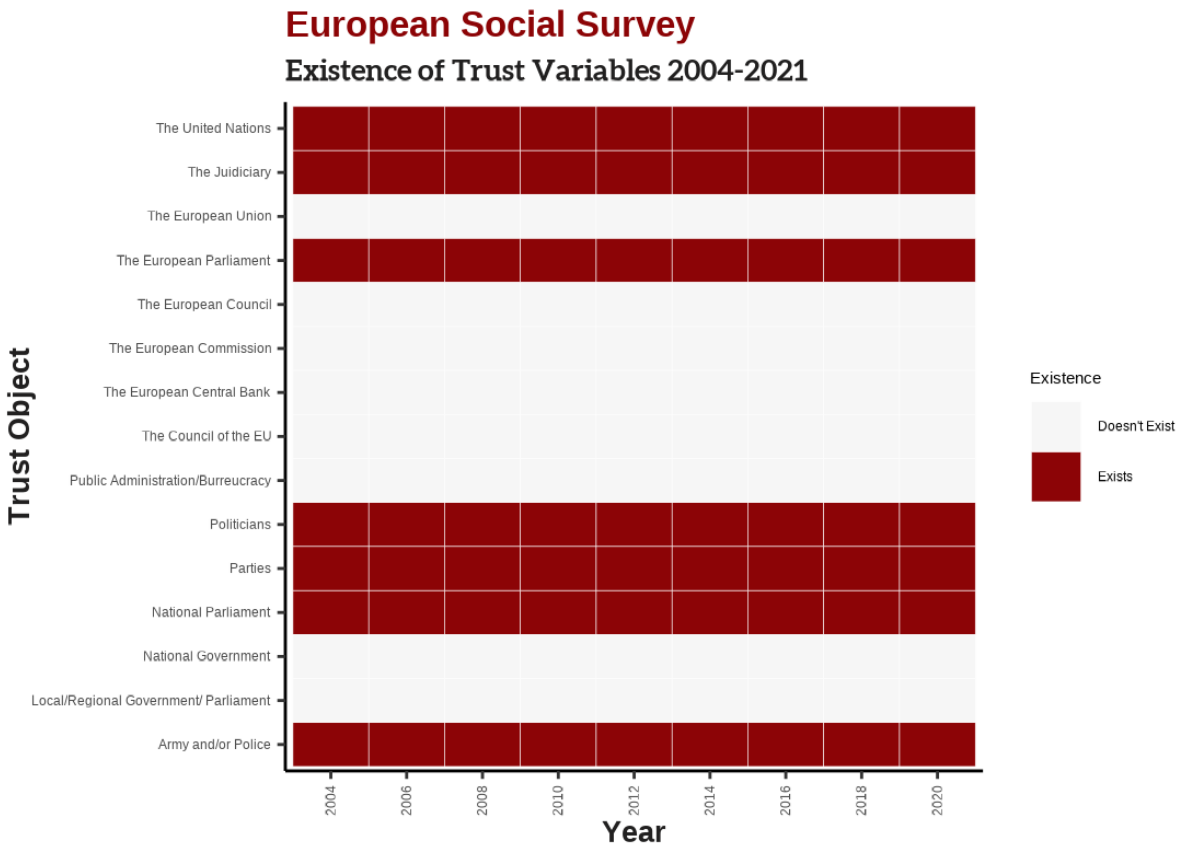
Figure 2. Overview of trust variables. European Election Studies, 2004–2019. (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou)



The research priorities of the EES around trust, as gauged by their availability, show a marked difference with the European Social Survey (ESS).

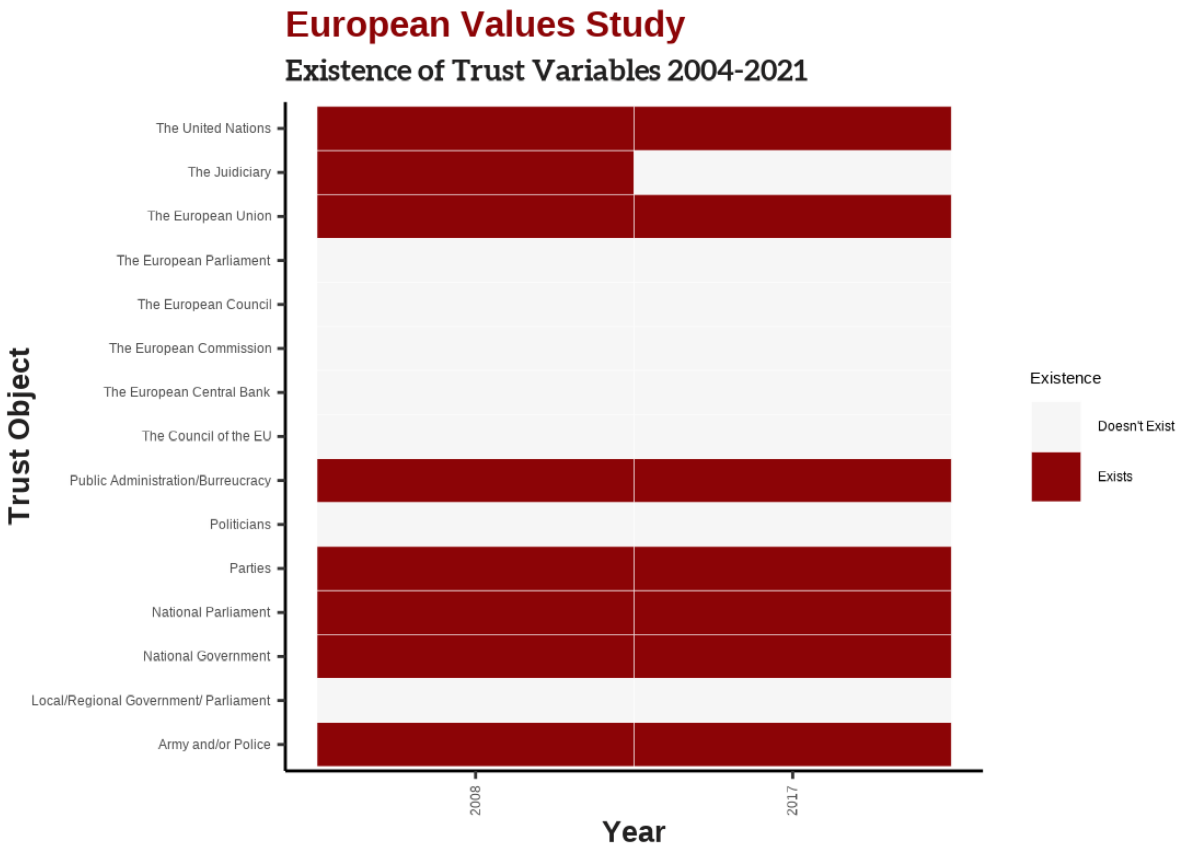
As Figure 3 shows, the ESS seems to aim for complete consistency, with the core biennial module tracking trust in several objects across all branches of government and distinct levels of governance. The ESS has been tracking levels of trust towards the UN, the justice system, as well as the European and national parliaments. Notably, it has extended the same interest for politicians and political parties as well.

Figure 3. Overview of trust variables. European Social Survey, 2004–2021. (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou)



Moving to the EVS and its two studies in our period of interest, as presented in Figure 4, we can observe an overall similar trend as with ESS, but not without some interesting differences. While the EVS survey does not aim to capture citizen's attitudes towards the European Parliament (EP), it has coverage of both the national and supranational levels of governance via items asking about the national parliament and government, and the EU in general terms. It includes, similarly to the ESS, questions about the judiciary, institutions of law enforcement/and security, as well as the United Nations.

Figure 4. Overview of trust variables. European Value Survey, 2008–2017. (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou)



Moving to ISSP, we in Figure 5 observe a more chequered image, reflecting the tight thematic focus of the project's waves. While one can find items for all levels of governance and branches of government, their availability over time varies greatly. For example, while the national government and national parliament objects have made it into four different survey waves each, the EP is only included once in the latest wave of the period under study. Overall, one might conclude that, as in the preceding charts, the national level is represented much more adequately with many national-level objects being present in more than one survey wave.

Figure 5. Overview of trust variables. International Social Survey Programme, 2004–2021. (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou)

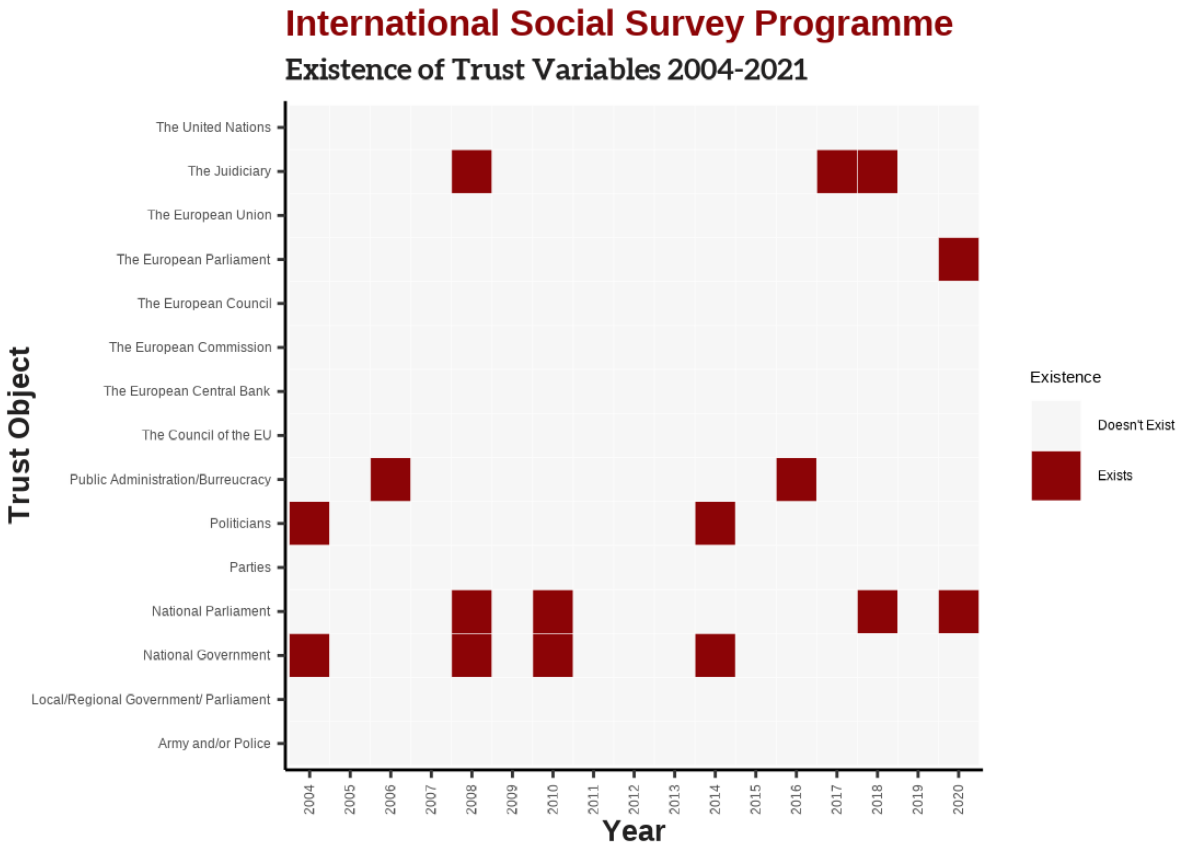
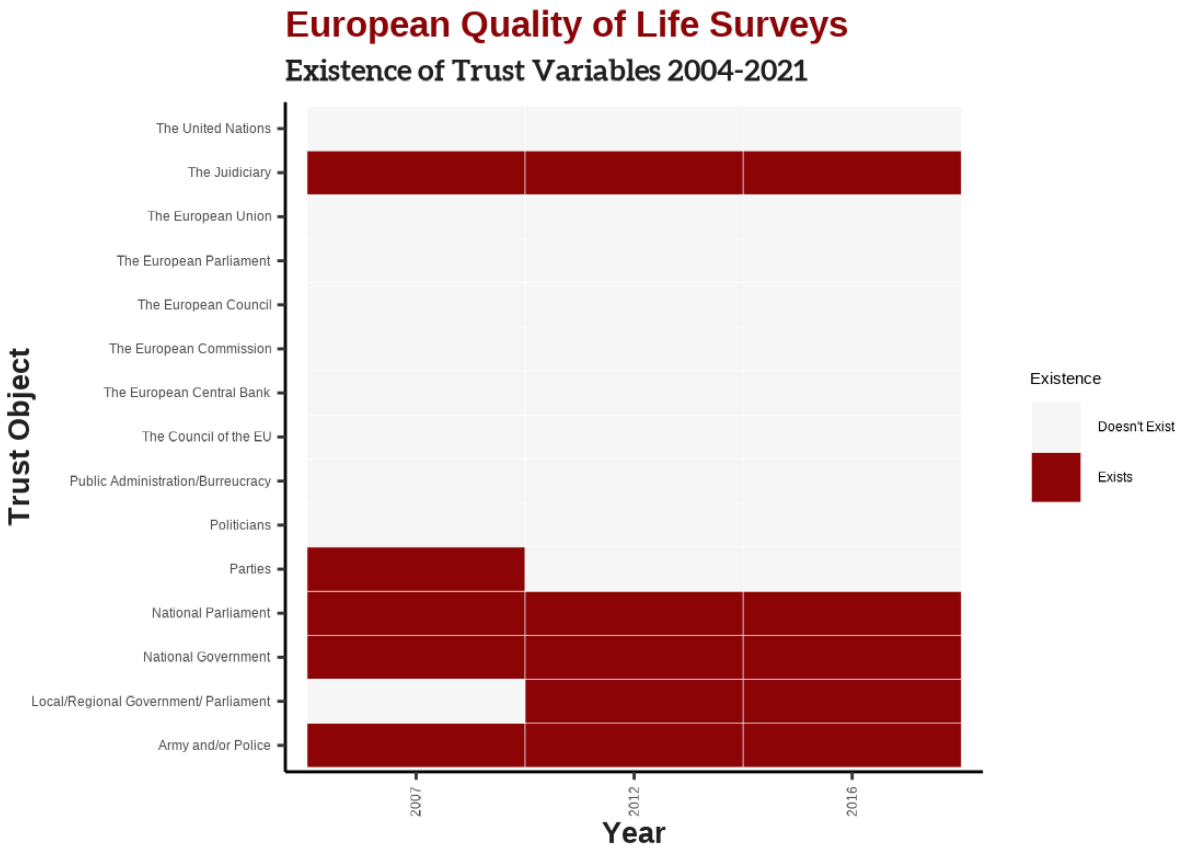


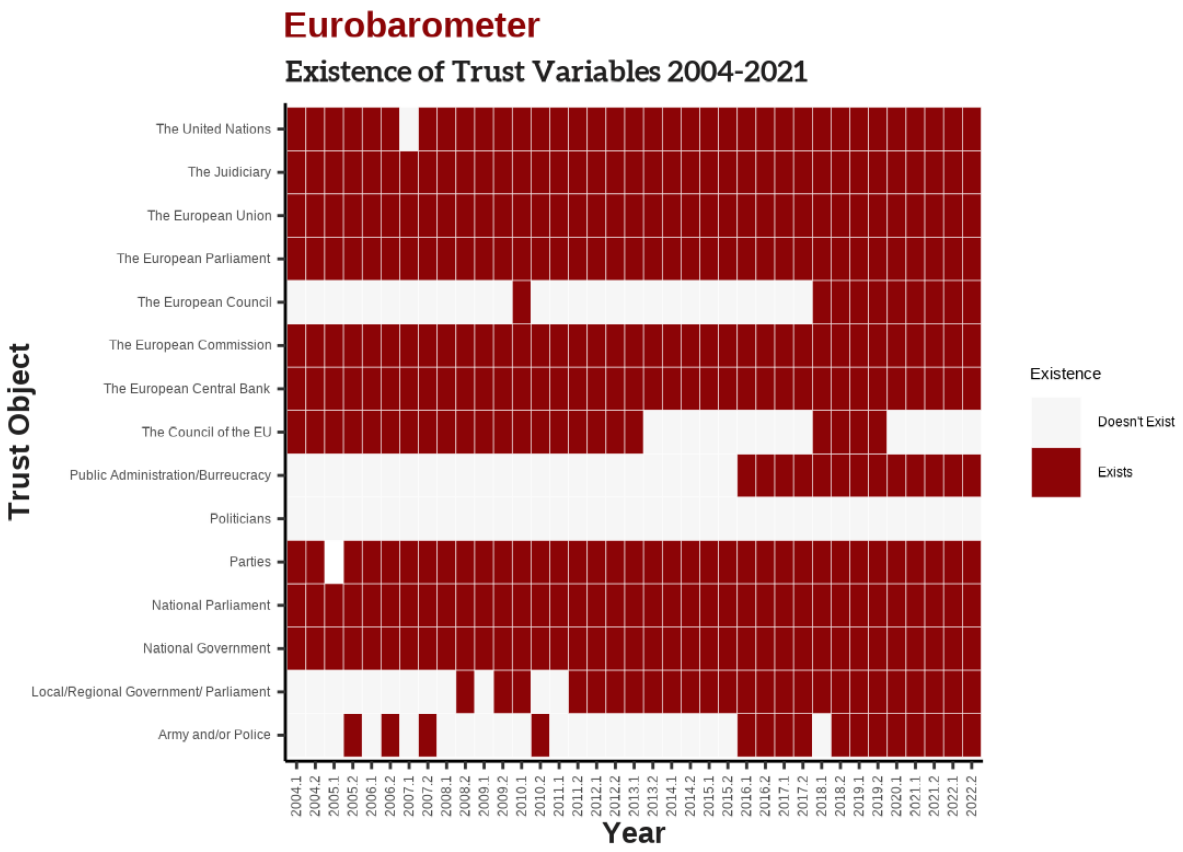
Figure 6 shows the overview of the two EQLS surveys. Again, here we can see the same primary emphasis on national-level institutions and actors, but, importantly, also the local level. The EQLS has included the local level twice, items for parties once, and items for the judiciary, national-level government, parliament, and army/police three times each. Of note, the European Quality of Life Survey has not included items on actors and institutions at the European level.

Figure 6. Overview of trust variables. European Quality of Life Surveys, 2007–2016. (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou)



Finally, Figure 7 shows the last survey of our overview, the Eurobarometer survey. The EB is by far the longer and denser time series, as the Standard EB is fielded twice a year, in Spring and Autumn. With the slight exception of the public administration and the army/police objects that appeared much more recently and the complete absence of politicians as an object, the EB boasts an impressive time series data set that encompasses trust in several national and EU-level institutions. Even if the survey instrument is a dichotomous variable, the existence of such a dense data set, with most objects of interest administered with the same survey is valuable for the scholarly community and beyond.

Figure 7. Overview of trust variables. Eurobarometer, 2004–2021. (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou)



Overall, it seems that there are stark differences among projects in terms of priorities in measuring trust. While all of them include one or more objects referring to the national level, their coverage of the EU level and subnational levels (regional and local) vary, with the subnational levels remaining the least covered levels of governance. This is a very important point, from the standpoint of analysing trends across countries, since it greatly restricts the number of options researchers can turn to. These difference in priorities seem to stem mostly from their thematic interest. While tracking political trust is less of a goal for the EES, for example (as an EP election post-electoral survey mostly interested in the interplay of EU and national politics), and the ISSP (which is focused on zeroing in on specific social topics), the Eurobarometer's mission to provide a continuous documentation of citizens attitudes around issues of trust is evident. The distinction between the more general-interest projects, like the EB and the ESS, and projects with specific foci, is clearly reflected in the availability of trust items.

Similarly, the same dividing line dictates different approaches to measurement. While the ISSP, EES, and EVS have relied on different measurement instruments across and within their respective survey waves, the EQLS, ESS, and EB have opted to maintain the same question characteristics. The trade-off, here, is one between adapting to advances in the methodological literature that could improve the validity of the measurement but would likely decrease comparability across time. The latter survey projects seem to privilege longitudinal comparability. This point may be more important than ever in the climate of changing sampling methodologies and modes of data collection (consider, for example the change in mode announced by the ESS for the coming 2024 wave) that could bias time series trends.

At the same time, the heterogeneity of question formats within and between projects, and the patterns of availability of different objects of trust, can be serious obstacles to valid, and thoroughgoing time series analyses of trust trends. This problem is only compounded by countries' non-uniform participation in survey projects. Consider, for example, the European Social Survey. Over its 11 rounds (2002–2022), some countries, like Germany and France, have participated in every single wave, while others, like Italy and Greece in around half of the waves (7 and 6 waves, accordingly), and some, like Albania, in only one wave. Given the cost of funding a country's participation in such collaborative projects, these patterns reflect country-level inequalities in funding opportunities and result in unequal representation of countries in comparative data.

Attempts to deal with this set of interrelated problems have mostly relied on ex-post harmonization of existing data. This refers to the pooling of survey data that has been collected from different surveys, at different points in time, with attendant differences in measurement and sampling methodologies. The aim is to maximise the scientific value of existing data by bringing them together in a single data set with harmonized values (meaning values recoded to a common denominator). Projects like this are very resource and time intensive, and as a result, they are faced with trade-offs between the scope of included variables and the number of surveys included.

More concretely, for research into political trust and the temporal span of interest for this report, two such post-harmonized projects are available, the Harmonized Eurobarometer, *HEB*, (Russo and Bräutigam, 2023), and the Survey Data Recycling file, *SDR2*, (Slomczynski et al., 2023). These data sets allow researchers to conduct longitudinal analyses, without having to merge the respective data sets manually, opening up research opportunities that would otherwise demand dedicated time and effort. For the purposes of this report, most analysis relies on the *HEB*, for reasons related to item availability, as presented in this chapter. Although this data provide the best available data for mapping development sin trust, it has some shortcomings for our purposes, as our results in the ensuing chapters also show.

3.4 Future avenues

Scholarly interest in political trust over the last decades has revived and is at an all-time peak. Since the middle of the 20th century, countless papers, books, and edited volumes have dedicated their attention to understanding the trends, drivers, and likely impact of political trust. The literature has benefited from contributions providing novel theoretical accounts or empirical investigations, and is bound to continue in that direction, affording a more nuanced understanding of the subject.

Based on the preceding paragraphs, we think several avenues appear promising. Perhaps most important of all, the literature would be enriched by rigorous scrutiny on the measurement of political trust. Understanding the validity and reliability of (the existing and new) measures of political trust would be a valuable tool in assessing and interpreting the amassing literature. Methodological advances like the multitrait-multimethod approach (MTMM) can afford insights into the relative advantages of measurement strategies.

A separate but no less valuable direction has to do with data availability. Researchers are abetted by high-quality and voluminous data. Access to data collected across several countries, with consistent methodology, and repeated waves is the bedrock of empirical research into political trust. In this respect, building on current infrastructures, like the centralized funding structure of the Eurobarometer, and the ex-ante harmonized European Social Survey will be key in democratizing political trust research. Expanded, EU-wide funding for cross-country research projects could reduce the existing inequality in country-level data availability, while an emphasis on standardizing the data (naming conventions across waves, for example) will free up a lot of research potential. Relatedly, additional funding to harmonize more of the already collected and deposited data would similarly empower potential for extended research within the scholarly community.

In terms substance, finally, within the framework of multi-level governance, tracking more closely the developments on trust in local institutions, which have received considerably less attention in both survey projects and harmonization projects, would be a step to better understanding of the dynamics of political trust in an era of deeper integration of the subnational, national, and EU governance levels, and the recent scholarly attention to the local level (see Vasilopoulou and Talving, 2024).

In the following chapters, it is explored what the available data can tell us about the developments in trust in Europe.

4 Dimensionality of political trust between EU and national institutions and actors

Jens Carstens, Laura Morales, Charles Pamies, Chiao Li

4.1 Introduction

Despite the multi-level governance structure in Europe, the social sciences have not established a uniform way of treating the various objects of political trust. As discussed in the previous Chapter 3, surveys typically ask respondents about the degree to which they trust a range of different political institutions and actors – national parliament, political parties, the government, the European Commission, and many more. Some researchers rely on additive or more complex indices combining a variety of combinations of different political institutions, while others focus on trust in one specific institution (see Devine, 2024:13 for an overview). Yet, to what extent citizens distinguish between different objects of trust in their trust evaluations is still not sufficiently examined. Is political trust the expression of one latent dimension of political system support, or do citizens actively and distinctly evaluate institutions in the multi-level structure of governance that is made up by the EU?

Some research has analysed the underlying dimensionality of political trust more systematically – with mixed results. Using confirmatory factor analysis, findings suggest that political trust in national institutions and actors is a latent one-dimensional attitude (Hooghe, 2011; Marien, 2013, 2017). A recent meta-analysis of existing trust research shows that the choice of objects of political trust does not lead to significantly different consequences of political trust (Devine, 2024). On the other hand, a Rasch model shows that objects of political trust at the national level are not interchangeable for citizens (van der Meer and Ouattara, 2019).

In line with these mixed empirical findings, two strands of literature have formed regarding the underlying structure of political trust in the multi-level structure of governance. On the one hand, researchers argue that citizens do not differentiate between different objects of trust. This line of research conceptualises political trust as a unidimensional syndrome. There is one latent form of trust that determines citizens' trust in all political institutions and actors. Researchers have found some evidence that national trust is used as a heuristic for citizens to assess trust in EU institutions and actors (Armingeon and Ceka, 2014; Hobolt, 2007). In line with that, trust in national institutions is the greatest predictor of trust in EU institutions (Muñoz, 2017). Decreases in trust in national institutions can be extrapolated to the European level (Torcal and Christmann, 2019). The reason for the strong positive correlation between trust at the national and European level could be that people know too little about the EU to evaluate it independently from national institutions (Harteveld et al., 2013; Muñoz et al., 2011) or that social trust determines both national political trust as well as trust in international organisations (Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2020).

On the other hand, researchers have pointed out that trust in the European Parliament (EP) has substantially polarised between social groups in Europe – leaving a dynamic of its own to European political trust (Bauer and Morisi, 2023). Furthermore, recent spatial analysis

suggests that regional inequality contributes to decreasing trust in national government while increasing trust in the EU (Dellmuth, 2024; Lipps and Schraff, 2021). Such a 'compensation' mechanism is also found among post-socialist EU Member States: individuals with low trust in national institutions, for instance, because of perceived corruption in their countries, are found to trust more in EU institutions (Muñoz, 2017; Závecz, 2017). Proszowska and colleagues (2022) extend this argument and posit that citizens' trust in national, European, and local levels is a subjectively rational evaluation of the political performance of the institutions at that respective level.

However, there seems to be some middle ground and conditioning factors: Talving and Vasilopoulou (2021) argue that in times of crises, the link between trust in national and European institutions is much stronger. Ares and colleagues (2017) point to the politicisation of European integration at the national level as a conditioning factor for a stronger link between national and European trust.

In this chapter, we will analyse the latent structure of trust in political institutions and actors at the European and national level. We will extend the exploratory analysis of trust as a unidimensional or two-dimensional attitude over time (2004 to 2021) and space (EU-27 Member States and the UK).

4.2 Analysis of the dimensionality of political trust between EU and national level

This section explores the latent dimensionality of trust in political institutions on the national level and the European level using survey data from the Harmonised Eurobarometer (HEB) from 2004 to 2021. The Eurobarometer includes a range of different trust objects on the national and European levels, as shown in the previous chapter. In a remarkable effort, Russo and Bräutigam (2023) have carried out a post-harmonisation of Eurobarometer surveys from 2004 to 2021. Such datasets are crucial sources for comparative and longitudinal research on political trust. However, in the HEB, only four political institutions are consistently included across all EU Member States and the UK: Trust in the European Parliament (EP), European Commission, National parliament, and national government.[1]

Figure 8 shows the percentage of missing data for the HEB per year. At the European level, trust in the European Court of Justice and the European Council are not consistently included to allow for a systematic analysis. On the national level, trust in the justice system and trust in political parties show gaps over time. The subsequent analysis of the sufficiently covered items of trust in the EP, the Commission, national parliament, and national government covers the EU-27 Member States and the UK and includes trust evaluations from 693,854 respondents. All analyses are performed using country weights.[2]

[1] See chapter 3 for an overview of available trust items in cross-national European surveys. Some trust items included in the original Eurobarometer survey are not included in the Harmonised Eurobarometer (HEB).

[2] The country weighting variable "wnation" was used.

Figure 8. Overview of the percentage of missings in the Harmonised Eurobarometer between 2004 and 2021 for the EU-27 Member States and the UK. (Jens Carstens, Laura Morales, Charles Pamies, Chiao Li)

Eurobarometer surveys use a dichotomous scale to measure political trust: "Please tell me if you tend to trust it [the political institution] or tend not to trust it". Methodological literature suggests exploring the dimensionality of dichotomous variables using polychoric correlation-based matrices (Barendse et al., 2015; Flora and Curran, 2004; Forero et al., 2009; Gadermann et al., 2012; Hoyle and Koziol, 2022; Kiliç et al., 2020; Nestler, 2013).

First, we explore the latent dimension structure of political trust across all EU-27 Member States and the UK from 2004 to 2021. Figure 9 shows that political trust is clearly two-

dimensional, with one national dimension and one European dimension (factor loadings in Table 2). Trust in the Commission and trust in the EP load almost exclusively onto the factor of latent EU trust. In turn, trust expressed in the national government and the national parliament loads strongly on a dimension capturing latent national political trust. Additionally, the national political institutions load moderately onto the EU trust dimension. In line with the literature, this finding suggests that while trust in the two European institutions constitutes a separate dimension, there are spillover effects from trust in national institutions to the European level.

Figure 9. Factor loadings of trust items on latent dimensions. (Jens Carstens, Laura Morales, Charles Pamies, Chiao Li)

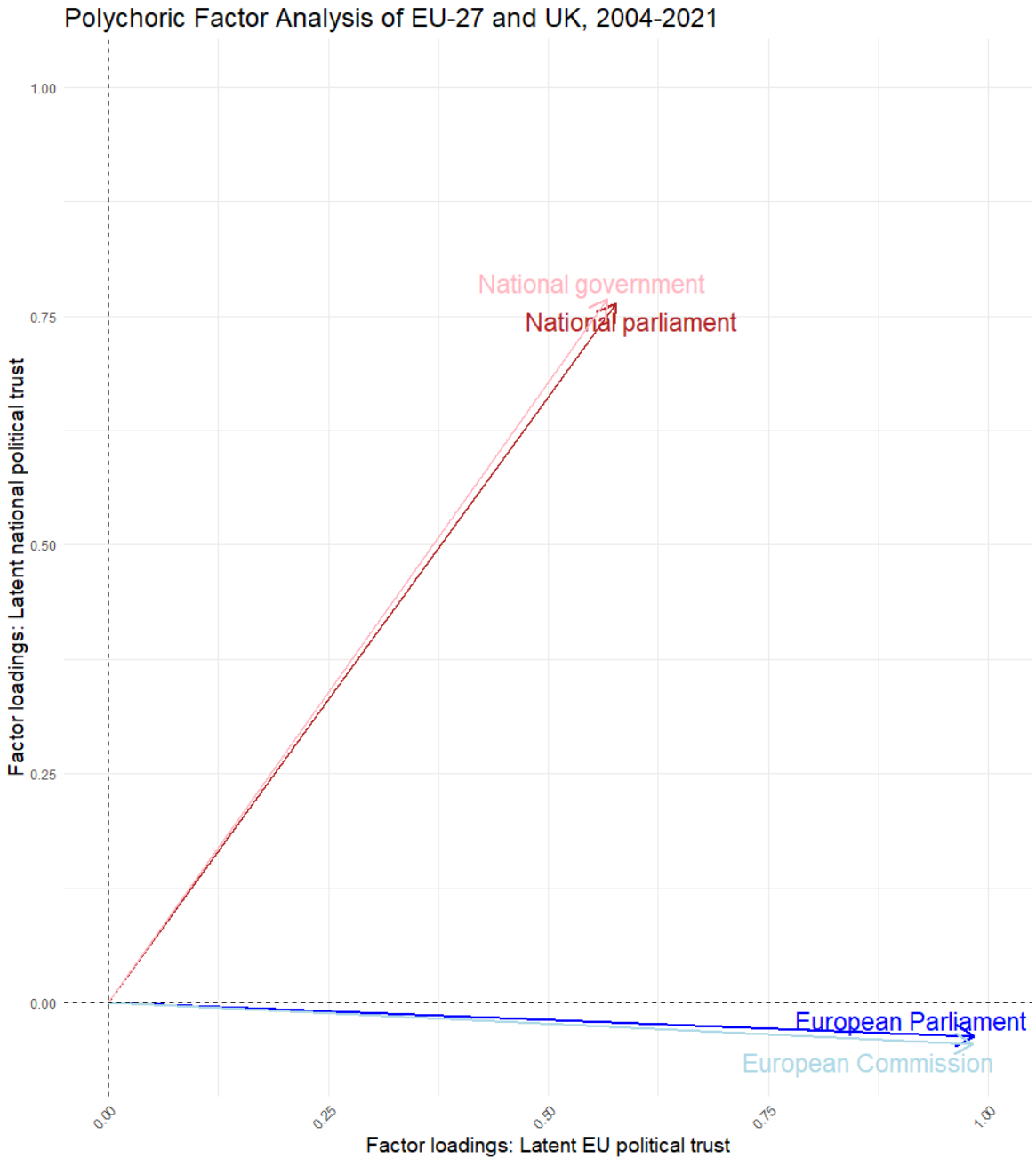


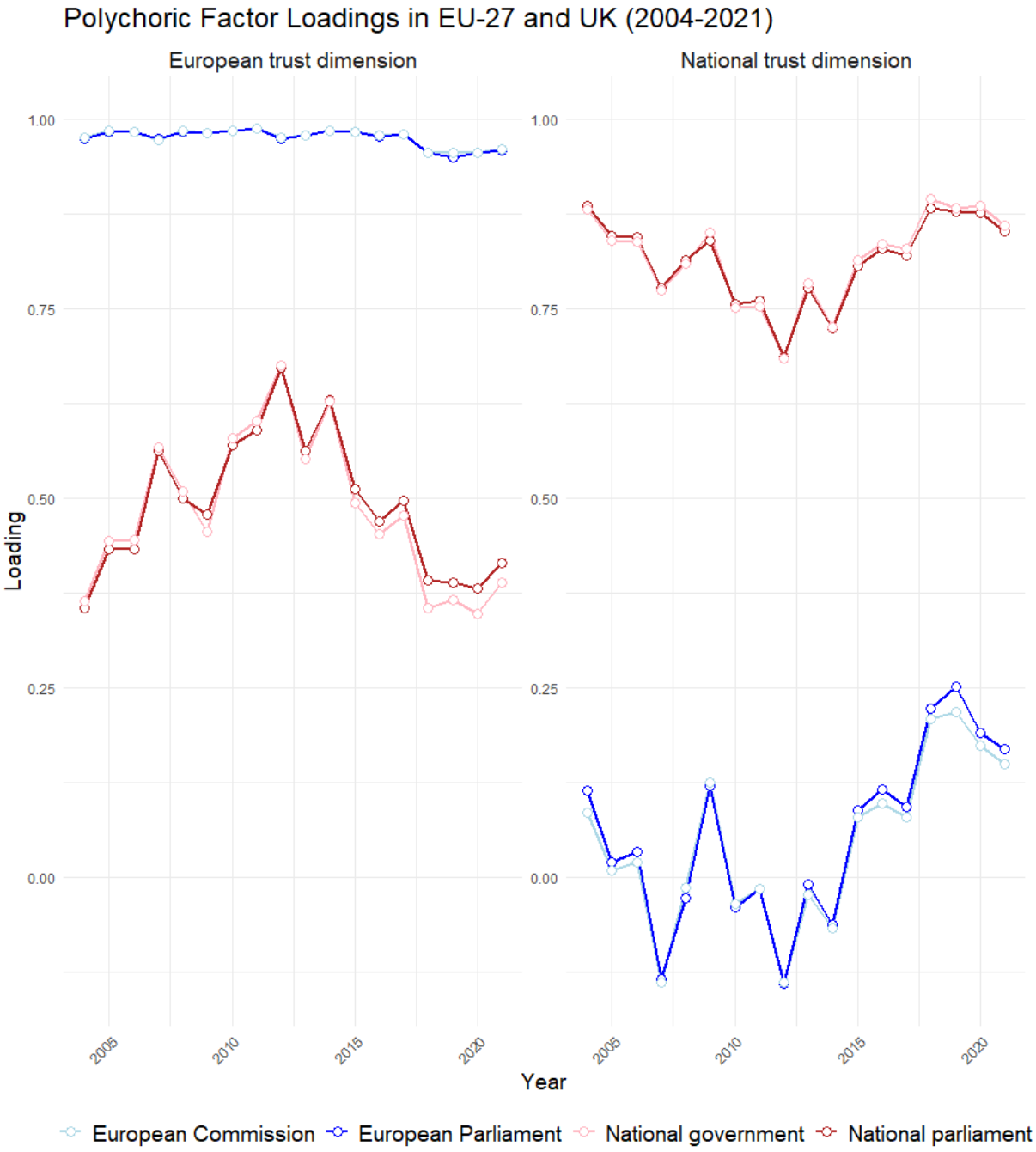
Table 2. Factor loadings of trust items on latent dimensions. (Jens Carstens, Laura Morales, Charles Pamies, Chiao Li)

Factor Loadings for EU and National Trust Dimensions		
Variable	EU trust	National trust
European Parliament (EP)	0.98	-0.04
European Commission	0.98	-0.05
National parliament	0.58	0.76
National government	0.57	0.77
Eigenvalues	2.59	1.18
Explained variance	0.68	0.31

Polychoric factor analysis for each year of the HEB data reveals the apparent impact of the Global Financial Crisis and the subsequent European Debt Crisis on the underlying latent structure of political trust. Figure 10 shows the developments of loading factors for each trust item on the latent European and national trust dimensions over time. The two European institutions load consistently high onto the latent European trust dimension with loading factors close to 1. However, the loadings of national institutions onto the latent European trust dimension increased from 0.36 in 2004 to 0.6 at the peak of the economic crisis in Europe in 2011. This finding suggests a shift in citizens' active distinction between European and national actors during this period in terms of how much they trust political actors and institutions. National economic performance and, therefore, national political trust were more closely related to citizens shaping their levels of European trust during the crisis. A similar, albeit slightly weaker, context-dependent trend is visible in the latent structure of the national trust dimension. Overall, the loadings of trust in the EP and the European Commission on the latent dimension of national political trust are much lower than those for national institutions on European-level trust. In the years before 2015, European-level loadings fluctuated around 0. However, with the beginning of increased migration to the EU in 2015, the loading of trust in European institutions onto the national trust dimension has increased, although it remains at loading values below 0.25.

In conclusion, the two-dimensional structure of political trust in a latent national and European dimension holds over time. However, the distinction is weaker for latent European-level trust, particularly during the Global Financial Crisis and the subsequent European Debt Crisis. In this crisis period, trust in the national government and parliament loaded higher onto the European trust dimension. After 2015, trust in the European Commission and EP started loading moderately on the latent national dimension. This highlights the role of political and economic contexts for the dimensionality of political trust between the EU and the national level.

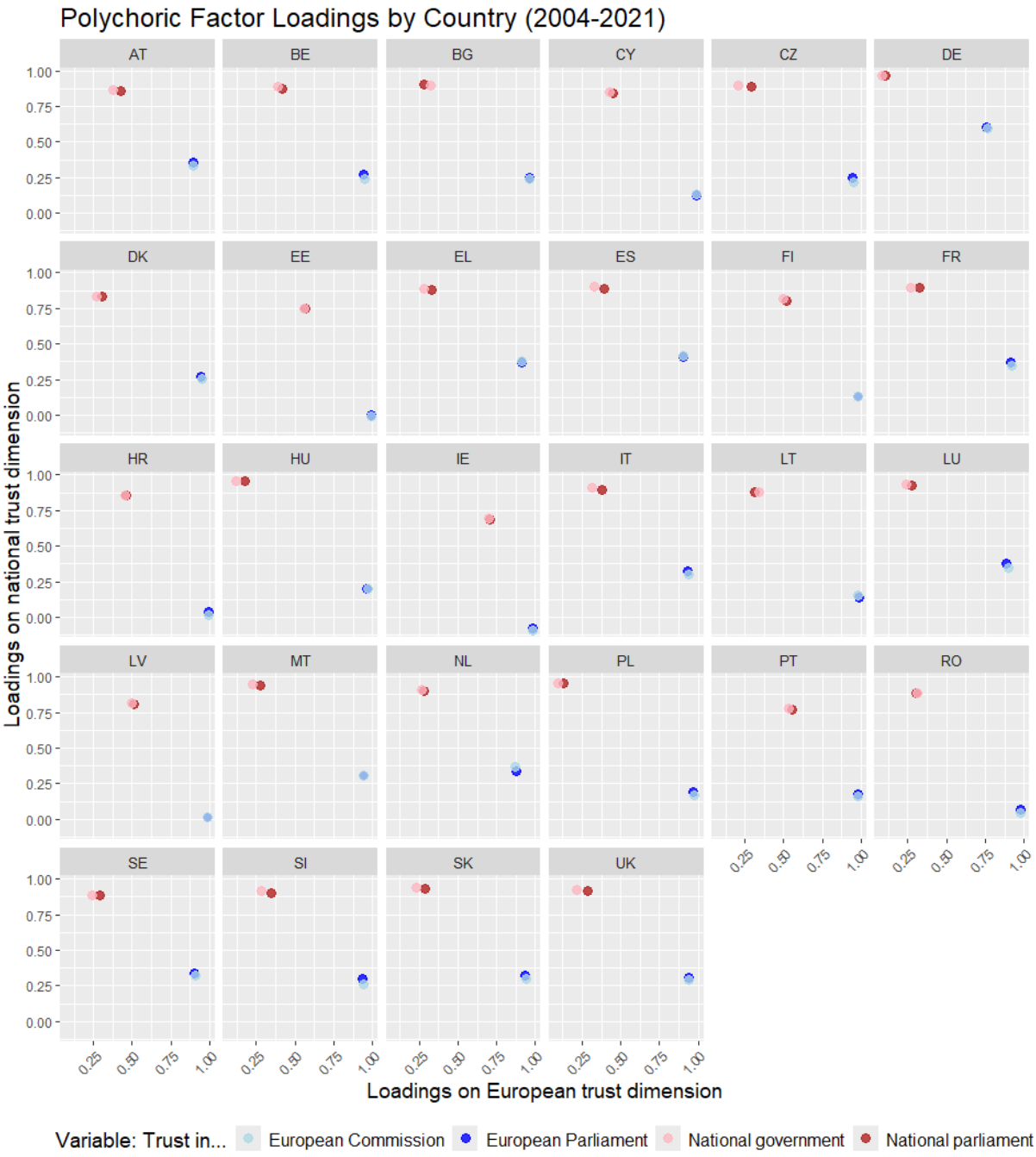
Figure 10. Factor loadings of trust items on latent dimensions over time, 2004–2021. (Jens Carstens, Laura Morales, Charles Pamies, Chiao Li)



While the two-dimensionality of political trust holds for all EU-27 Member States and the UK, there are some important cross-country differences in the latent dimensionality structure. Figure 11 shows the factor loadings of polychoric factor analysis per country. For all countries, European and national institutions load consistently onto the latent European or national trust dimension, respectively. This finding confirms the robust two-dimensional structure of political trust. However, there is considerable variance between the countries in the size of loadings onto the latent national trust dimension. Notably, Germany shows high loadings of the EP and the European Commission onto the latent national trust dimension (around 0.6, compared to around 0.76 for national institutions). Trust in the national government and

national parliament is predominantly aligned with the latent national trust dimension, but it also has a moderate association with the European trust items. This indicates that those who trust the national government in Germany also tend to have some level of trust in European institutions and that respondents in Germany evaluate trust in EU institutions from a 'national' prism to a greater extent than other Europeans. In Ireland and Estonia, however, the situation is reversed, meaning that these citizens evaluate their trust in the national parliament and government tinted by their evaluations of EU institutions.

Figure 11. Factor loadings of trust items on latent dimensions across countries, 2004–2021. (Jens Carstens, Laura Morales, Charles Pamies, Chiao Li)



It is also important to point out that in most countries (and for the European average citizen), citizens do not make huge distinctions between their levels of trust in the two national institutions (parliament and government) or between the two EU institutions (Parliament and Commission). Trust in national government and national parliament loads consistently similarly on the latent national trust dimension, as does trust in the EP and European Commission onto the latent European trust dimension. However, we see some small departures from this pattern: in Czechia, latent European trust is shaped to a greater extent by views of the national government than by those in the national parliament (and to a lesser degree, this is a pattern also hinted at for Spain, France, Italy and the UK).

4.3 Conclusion

The corollary of these analyses is that political trust in national and European institutions are two separate latent dimensions. Citizens seem to distinguish between EU and national institutions and actors in terms of their trust evaluations. Trust in different levels of governance is evaluated separately. While there are some important overlaps, trust in the national government and national parliament describes latent national-level trust and trust in the EP and European Commission describe a separate dimension of European trust. This has two important implications for academics and policymakers:

Separate measurements: Citizens' trust levels reflect the multi-level nature of governance in Europe. Political trust in national and European institutions and actors is best analysed separately rather than jointly in a single index of political trust.

Separate trends and drivers: Political trust is not a unidimensional syndrome. There can be separate developments and drivers of trust at the national and European levels. This puts the spotlight on the performance of institutions and actors to deliver for citizens at both levels.

However, the overlap between trust in national and EU institutions depends on the political and economic context. During the Global Financial Crisis and the subsequent European Debt Crisis, trust in national institutions (and, through this, national economic performance) was more influential on the latent European trust dimension. In the context of increasing migration after 2015, trust in European institutions (and through this, support for open European societies) became more influential for the latent national trust dimension, albeit at a more moderate level.

Following this insight into the separate nature of trust in European and national institutions, the following chapters will analyse trust developments separately: trust in European institutions and actors in Chapter 5 and trust in national-level institutions and actors in Chapter 6.

5. Developments in political trust over time at the European level

Janette Huttunen and Henrik Serup Christensen

5.1 Introduction

The discussion on developments in trust has predominantly focused on developments at the national level. Although it is sometimes argued recognised that people may distinguish between different levels of political trust (Proszowska et al., 2022), empirical research frequently focus exclusively on political trust at the national level. The lack of suitable indicators for other levels that was demonstrated in Ch. 3 is one reason for this. However, this has also been informed by an explicit or implicit assumption that political trust forms a unidimensional phenomenon, regardless of level of governance (Hooghe, 2011), even if this is debatable, as demonstrated in Ch. 4.

There are therefore reasons to believe that the trends between national and European levels may differ. Furthermore, these differences may have been amplified in recent decades. The Eastern enlargement that took place in 2004 entailed that ten countries from Central and Eastern Europe became members (Matlak et al., 2018). Their EU membership came with a promise of modernization and stabilization of the new, or reestablished, democratic institutions in the former communist states, as well as a promise for functioning market economy and improved national and individual economic situation (Sojka, 2015).

While EU membership initially delivered economic benefits for these new member countries, they may also have been affected by the economic turmoil created by financial and debt crises in the early 2010s. Even if these countries were less severely affected by the economic turmoil than Southern European member states, the efforts of the EU to restore faith in the Euro shaped the image of the EU across the continent. Previous research shows that economic performance is an important determinant for people's political trust (Bonasia et al., 2016), and that the 2008 financial crisis with its aftermath affected citizens' trust in public institutions, especially in countries where the economic recession was more severe (Kroknes et al., 2015; Murtin et al., 2018). The financial crisis caused a debt crisis around 2010 in the Eurozone (De Grauwe, 2010), which led to the implementation of fiscal austerity measures in several countries (Corsetti, 2012). These measures had severe consequences in many countries, including high unemployment in Greece, Portugal, Spain, and Ireland (Roth et al., 2013; Zamora-Kapoor and Coller, 2014). The effects of the debt crisis were severe especially strong in these so-called periphery countries (Roth et al., 2013), where economic and political chaos led to declining trust in the European Commission and the European Parliament (EP) (Roth et al., 2013). However, the economic and political turmoil affected trust in all member countries of the EU, and although differences exist, the crises had consequences both within creditor and debtor countries (Hopkin, 2020). Hence the question of trends in the developments in political trust is relevant across all EU member states.

Brexit may also have affected trust in European-level actors and institutions across the EU. The 2016 referendum on UK membership and the ensuing debate over the purported benefits of national independence created uncertainty about the future of European integration (De

Luca, 2023). While the direct impact on citizens in other member states were minimal, the increased uncertainty that the UK faced was at least in the short run interpreted as evidence of the benefits of EU membership. It could ostensibly, therefore, also mean that people would come to put greater trust in European-level actors, even if the implications are uncertain.

The early 2020s are also marked by uncertainty as the global Covid-19 pandemic led to severe measures all over Europe to protect people's health and lives. The national measures to combat the pandemic included lockdowns and closing of national boarders in the name of public health, thereby violating EU citizens' rights to free movement within the union, which has been one of the central pillars of the EU. Since our timeline includes the early stages of Covid-19 response, we can see the pandemic's early effects on European citizens' trust. The impact of this is undoubtedly complex and lack of data after early 2021 means that our contribution only marks a small first step in establishing the impact of the pandemic on trust in the European level.

Since these events may have different implications for national and European level actors, it is of interest to discern whether the trends in trust at the European and national levels follow similar patterns. While we here focus on the European level, the subsequent chapter will focus on examining national-level actors in an analogous manner.

We in this chapter examine the developments in political trust in EU-level actors in 28 countries: the 27 EU member states and the UK, which left the EU in 2020. A pertinent question remains how the patterns of trust have developed, and whether trust in the EU and its institutions have been restored since a decrease after the economic crises, in times of political backlashes combined with ever rising Euroscepticism and anti-EU attitudes. We examine this with the help of data from the harmonized Eurobarometer (HEB) for the years 2004–2021 (Russo and Bräutigam, 2023). We focus on indicators of trust in political actors that cover both legislative and executive branches of governing at the European level: the EP and the Commission, as well as trust in the EU in general. The EP and the Commission represent the main EU actors that are most likely to be familiar to respondents. Additionally, these three indicators were the only items on trust in European-level actors with full timeseries in HEB. We also examine trust in other EU institutions available in HEB, and the patterns these can be found in the Supplementary Appendix. As the results will show, the different EU institutions display largely similar trends in trust, which suggests that respondents do not differentiate between different institutions. The focus on a selection of items in the main rapport therefore allows us to avoid repetitiveness while still showing the key developments of trust in the European level over time.

We analyse the results for each actor in the following steps, which is also used in the subsequent Ch. 6 on developments at the national level:

First, we show figures displaying developments for all countries together with developments in the overall mean level of trust. These make it possible to discern whether the countries show similar trends or there seem to be variations.

Second, we display developments in trust across four geographical clusters of countries:

1. ***Nordic countries***: Denmark, Finland, and Sweden.
2. ***Western European countries***: Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, and the UK.
3. ***Southern European countries***: Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, and Spain.

4. ***Central and Eastern European countries***: Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

Third, we subsequently group countries with similar trends into categories. We do this based on two simple analyses: Pearson's correlation analysis to see whether the trend is positive or negative, and simple regressions between political trust and years where we include a second order term for years to see whether the trend is linear or curvilinear.

Table 3 below shows how we classify countries based on the results. We in the appendix include figures that also show results of these calculations.

Table 3. Categories for classifying countries. (Janette Huttunen and Henrik Serup Christensen)

Category	Pearson's r	Regression
Trendless fluctuations	Between +/- .30	Linear
Full recovery	Between +/- .30	Curvilinear
Linear increase	Over .30	Linear
Partial increase	Over .30	Curvilinear
Linear decrease	Under -.30	Linear
Partial recovery	Under -.30	Curvilinear

All results are presented in several figures that will help visualize the results.

This chapter is divided into four sections. In the first three sections, we examine the developments in trust first for the EU in general (5.2), the EP (5.3), and the Commission (5.4). In the final section (5.5), we summarize our findings.

To preview our findings, the analyses suggest that despite the decrease in trust after the financial and debt crises, trust in the EU and its institutions have been (at least partially) recovered in most EU countries. We also see interesting, presumably Covid-19 related, patterns in trust in the early 2020s, where trust in the EU and its institutions decreased in many countries in 2020 but increased again in 2021.

5.2 Trust in the EU

We first examine developments in trust in the EU in Figure 12, which shows the mean values for developments of trust by country and year. The darker line represents the aggregated mean value.

The levels of trust vary a considerably across countries (light grey lines). The percentage of citizens who trust the EU has peaked at over 80% in some countries, while it has been as low as 20% in others. Despite fluctuations in the percentage of citizens who trust the EU in all countries, there continues to be differences between the countries; in 2021, the deviation between the country with highest and lowest trust was about 45 percentage points.

Observing the developments in trust over the years, we see that there have been significant fluctuations. Especially two significant and clear downwards spikes in almost all countries are visible in the figure; the first after the economic crises in the early 2010s, and the second in 2020, the starting year of the Covid-19 pandemic measures.

The aggregated mean trust in the EU was in 2004 below 60 per cent and in 2021 around 50 per cent. This means that the average level of trust in the EU decreased slightly 2004–21. However, after a drop in the aftermath of the financial crisis and a peak bottom around 2014

in the wake of the debt crisis, it is notable that trust in the EU has been increasing again in recent years. The aggregated mean trust suggests a partial recovery of trust in the EU.

In Figure 13, we continue the analysis by examining country-level differences in the developments in trust in the EU for the four geographical categories. The developments in trust here differ markedly among countries. The figure shows the percentage of respondents in each country that trust the EU. In all countries, trust in the EU has fluctuated over time, as was also evident from Figure 12. In most countries, there is a visible decrease in trust in the EU, most likely due to the financial crisis starting in 2008. However, the extent of the decrease varies since countries that were more severely affected by the financial crisis, including Ireland, Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain, experience a noticeable stronger decline.

Examining the country-wise differences in trust in the EU show that the levels of trust vary between the countries, but with a few exceptions, the developments in trust are remarkably similar within the country clusters.

The three Nordic countries along with most Western European countries show a similar trend in trust: rising trust before the financial and debt crises, a clear, but in comparison to the Southern cluster, smaller drop in trust after the debt crisis and again rising trust with some smaller fluctuations in the latter part of 2010s. In the Nordic countries we see that the trust in the EU decreased in 2021, which contradicts developments in many other countries. In many Western European countries, we see a drop in trust in the beginning of Covid-19 in 2020, with rising trust again in 2021. The patterns of trust have in many ways, however, been similar in the Nordic and the Western European countries. The two major exceptions are the UK, where trust in the EU has always been on a low level, and Ireland, which was heavily affected by the financial crisis. In Ireland, there was a steep decrease in trust after the financial crisis in 2008 and the debt crisis in the early 2010s.

In the Southern European cluster, citizens' trust in the EU decreased after the financial and debt crises. Especially in Greece, Portugal, and Spain there was a steep decrease in trust. These countries experienced both an economic and political crisis in the late 2000s and early 2010s, when the EU austerity measures, done in exchange for financial assistance, increased unemployment rates and led to national political crises (Zamora-Kapoor and Coller, 2014). The exception in this cluster is Malta, where the decrease in trust after the financial crisis was much more moderate and where people exhibit notably higher trust in the EU than people in the other Southern European countries. Also, Cyprus shows more of a fluctuating trend in trust than the other countries, with a steep drop in the early 2010s. However, trust in the EU seems to have recovered, or be on its way to recovery, in the 2020s. Despite a dip in trust again in 2020 in all Southern European countries, trust was again rated higher in all these countries in 2021.

The Central and Eastern Europe category includes the most countries and even if they joined the EU about the same time and share some historical legacies, they are also a very heterogenic group of countries. In many of the Central and Eastern European, trust in the EU was very high in the beginning of the 2000s, which can be explained by the promises of democratic freedom and economic prosperity that membership offered the post-communist states (Sojka, 2015). Unsurprisingly considering the diverse set of countries, the fluctuations and trends differ across this country category. In Croatia, which only joined the EU in 2013, trust in the EU has been lower than in the other Eastern European countries before joining but it increased after becoming a member. The financial crisis does not seem to have had a similar adverse impact as in Southern Europe or Ireland, even though the Central and Eastern

European countries were also affected by the global financial crisis. There is, however, a drop in trust in 2020 in all the Central and Eastern European countries, which we assume is due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Trust in the EU, however, increased again in 2021.

This country-wise comparison already reveals some common patterns in the trends in trust over the period. Following this, we in Figure 14 categorize countries based on the trends they display, as outlined above.

Figure 14 shows that five countries experienced trendless fluctuations in trust in the EU: Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Malta, Latvia, and Lithuania. In these countries, there have been changes from year to year, but we are unable to identify clear trends in the developments. Nevertheless, it is remarkably few countries that correspond to patterns of trendless fluctuations, as suggested by Norris (2011), among others.

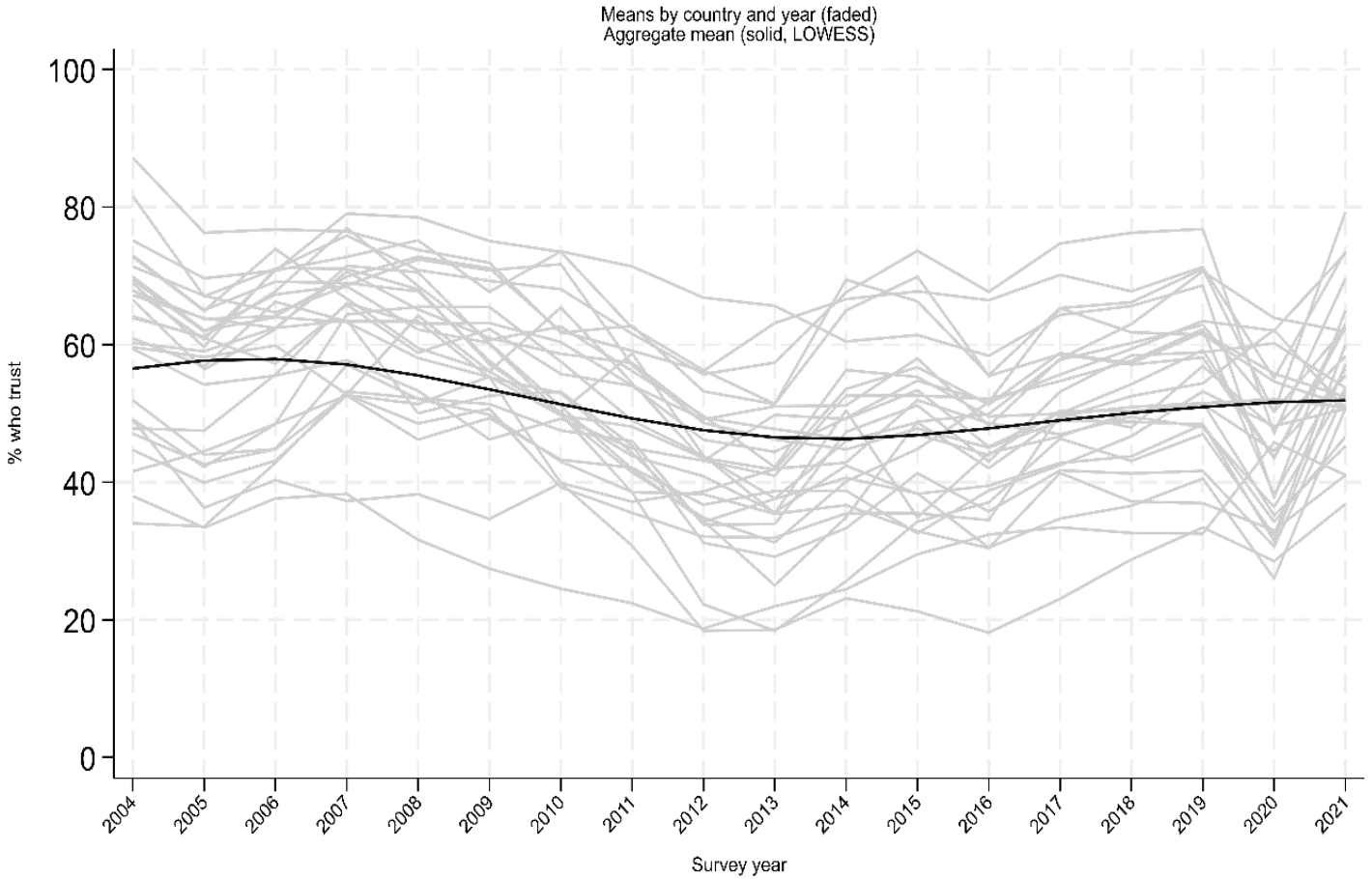
Seven countries experienced a linear decline in trust: Belgium, France, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Estonia, Poland, and Slovakia. These countries represent a varied assortment of EU member states. Belgium and France were among the founding member states, whereas Cyprus, Estonia, Poland, and Slovakia joined in the Eastern enlargement in 2004, and Bulgaria in 2007. Thus, trust in the EU has decreased both in older and newer member states.

Several countries experienced an initial decline following the financial and debt crises, but in these countries, there has been an upward trend in recent years. There has been a partial recovery in trust in seven countries: Greece, Italy, Spain, Czechia, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, while in five countries levels of trust bounced all the way back to the original level: Austria, Germany, Ireland, the UK, and Portugal. This entails that trust in the EU increased or (at least partially) recovered in 16 countries. It is notable that especially in countries that suffered heavily of the consequences of the financial crisis – countries in the Southern Europe and Ireland, trust has bounced back towards the level before the financial crisis. This suggests that the extensive worries over how the financial crisis affected legitimacy of the EU may have been exaggerated since levels of trust relatively quickly recovered.

Finally, four countries display patterns of increasing linear trust: Denmark, Finland, Sweden, and Croatia. Trust in the EU has thus increased in all the Nordic member countries, as well as Croatia, which is the latest member state joining in 2013. As noted in the country-wise comparisons, trust in the EU was lower in Croatia compared to other countries in the Central and Eastern European cluster before the country joined the EU. In this sense, the increase may indicate that Croatia is catching up to the general level in these countries.

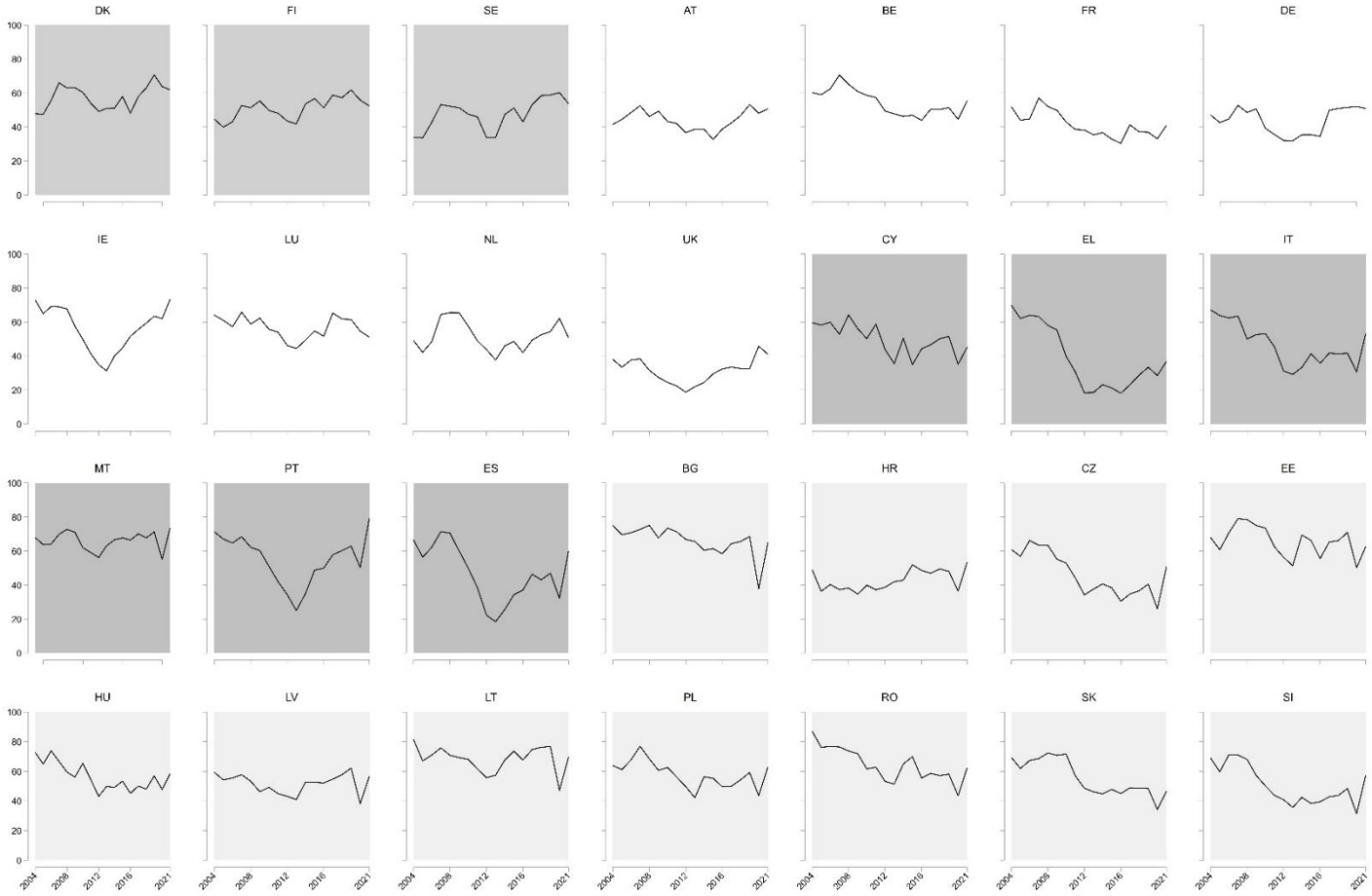
Following this, we examine more specific levels of trust in the EP and the Commission.

Figure 12. Developments in trust in the EU, 2004–2021. (Janette Huttunen & Henrik Serup Christensen)



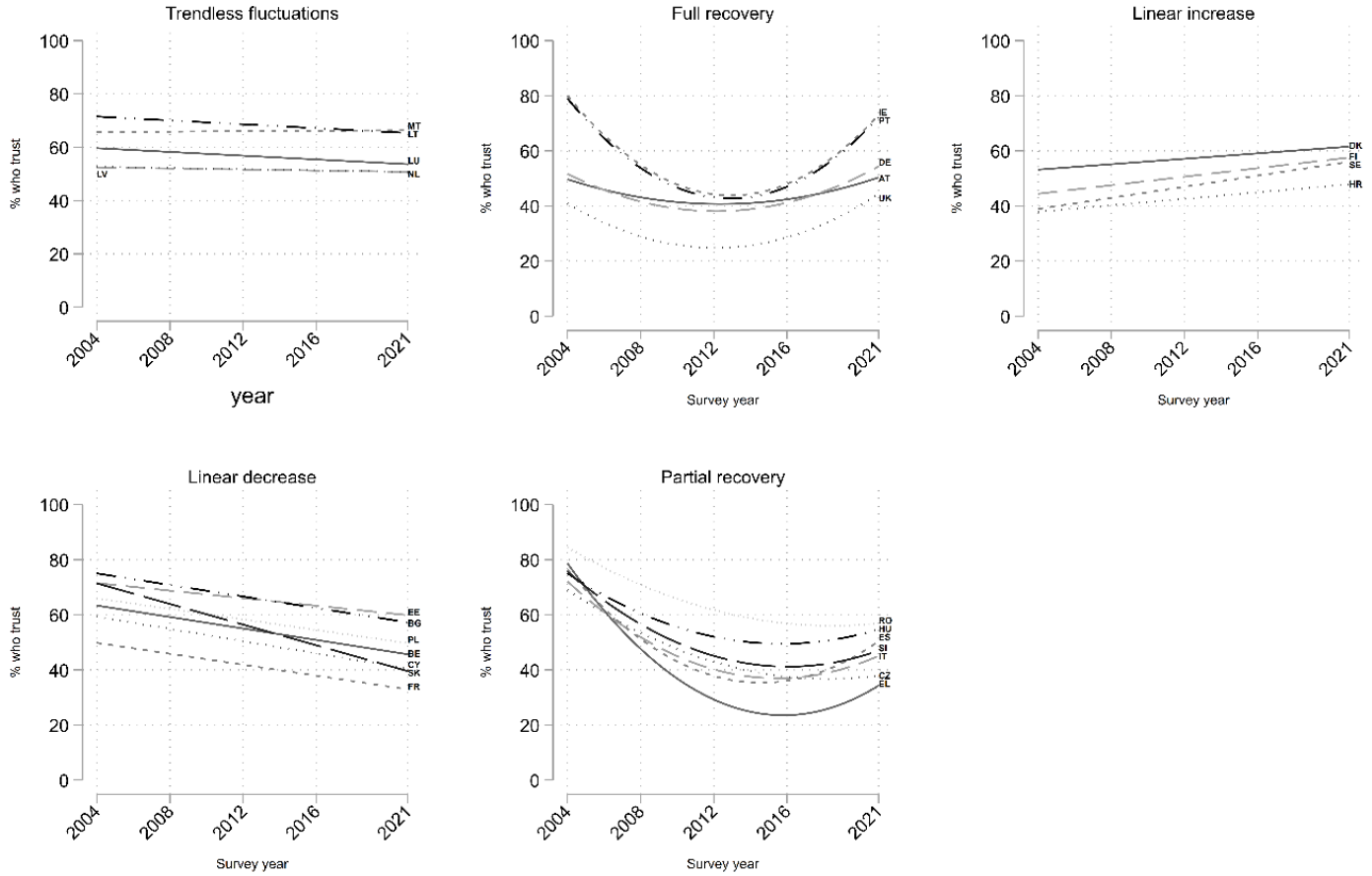
Source: Harmonized Eurobarometer (Russo and Bräutigam, 2023)

Figure 13. Mean trust in the EU by country and year, 2004–2021. (Janette Huttunen & Henrik Serup Christensen)



Note: *Countries displayed within the following regions (grouped by shade tone): Nordic, Western Europe, Southern Europe, Former Communist Countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Source: Harmonized Eurobarometer (Russo and Bräutigam, 2023)*

Figure 14. Trends in trust in the EU by country and year, 2004–2021. (Janette Huttunen & Henrik Serup Christensen)



Source: Harmonized Eurobarometer (Russo and Bräutigam, 2023)

5.3 Trust in the European Parliament (EP)

Figure 15 shows the percentage of respondents who trust the EP by country and year. The darker line again represents the aggregated mean value. Similarly to the reporting above, we first examine overall trends and the proceed to examining country differences.

A first noticeable finding is that trust in the EP is higher than for trust in the EU in general. This may be due to, for example, general Euroscepticism affecting EU ratings more than the ratings of trust in the actual institutions.

Other than this, the variations between countries in the percentage of citizens who trust the EP resemble the EU measure. Some countries display rather high levels of trust, up to 90% in one country, while in others trust in the EP is much lower, as low as just over 20 per cent in some countries. Compared to trust in the EU, there are no clear fluctuations after the financial and debt crises in all countries, despite seeing some noticeable drops in some countries. There is a decrease in trust in 2020 in most countries, but it is not as steep as for the EU in general.

At the aggregate level, trust in the EP was lower in 2021 (about 60%) compared to 2004 (about 70%). However, the results also show that trust in the EP has been increasing in recent years. The aggregated mean trust suggests that trust in the EP was at its lowest in 2013/2014 after the debt crisis but that trust is recovering.

Figure 16 shows the differences across clusters of countries, and it shows remarkable differences, yet there are similarities within country clusters. In the Nordic cluster, trust in the EP is around or above 60 per cent and the three Nordic countries follow similar patterns of mostly steady trust with increasing trust in the late 2010s with a decrease in trust in 2020s. In Western Europe, the developments in trust in the EP have generally been steady without any major fluctuations. One exception is Ireland, which was heavily affected by the financial and debt crises. Here there was a steeper drop in trust after 2008. Another exception is the UK. The UK exhibited the lowest trust in the EP over the 20-year period. In most Western European countries, we see a slight decrease in trust in 2020, with an increase in trust in 2021. However, in Ireland, The Netherlands, and the UK the trend is the opposite: trust was higher in 2020 than in 2021.

Previous research shows that trust in the EP declined more in countries that were hit harder after the financial crisis (Dotti Sani and Magistro, 2016). This is also evident in the trends for Southern Europe. In most countries, there was a major decrease in trust in the EP. This is not visible in Malta, where trust in the EP is high, or in Cyprus, where trust did decrease but not as much as in the other Southern European countries. The drop was especially strong in Portugal, Spain, and Greece, but also in Italy. However, trust in the EP has increased in recent years, especially in the three countries where the decrease was strongest. Especially in Portugal the trust seems to have been restored. We also see what we presume a Covid-19 inflicted decrease in trust in 2020 in all other Southern European countries expect Portugal, with an increase in trust again in 2021 in Italy, Malta, and Spain.

Many of the Central and Eastern European countries exhibited very high trust in the EP after joining in the early 2000s. Some continue to exhibit very high trust (Lithuania, Estonia), while in other countries there appears to have been a significant decrease in trust since the financial and debt crises (Slovakia, Slovenia), and even decreases in trust in the late 2010s (Czechia). However, the decrease in trust following the financial crisis is not as steep as in Southern Europe. Furthermore, there is not a decrease in trust in the EP that was evident for the EU in general in this country cluster. Several factors may contribute to these patterns. The high trust in EP, especially in the early days of EU membership, may be due to the promises of prosperity and political stability (Bardi et al., 2002). Furthermore, the Central and Eastern European have low

levels of trust in their national institutions, a legacy of the communist history (Ceka, 2013; Wallace and Latcheva, 2006) and a result of political and economic performance (Mishler and Rose, 2001). EU institutions may therefore be evaluated more favourably than national institutions (Sojka, 2015).

A similar drop cannot be seen for trust in EP in 2020 in Eastern Europe as was apparent for trust in the EU in general. Hence, it would seem like a potential Covid-19 effect did not affect trust in the EP in the Central and Eastern European cluster.

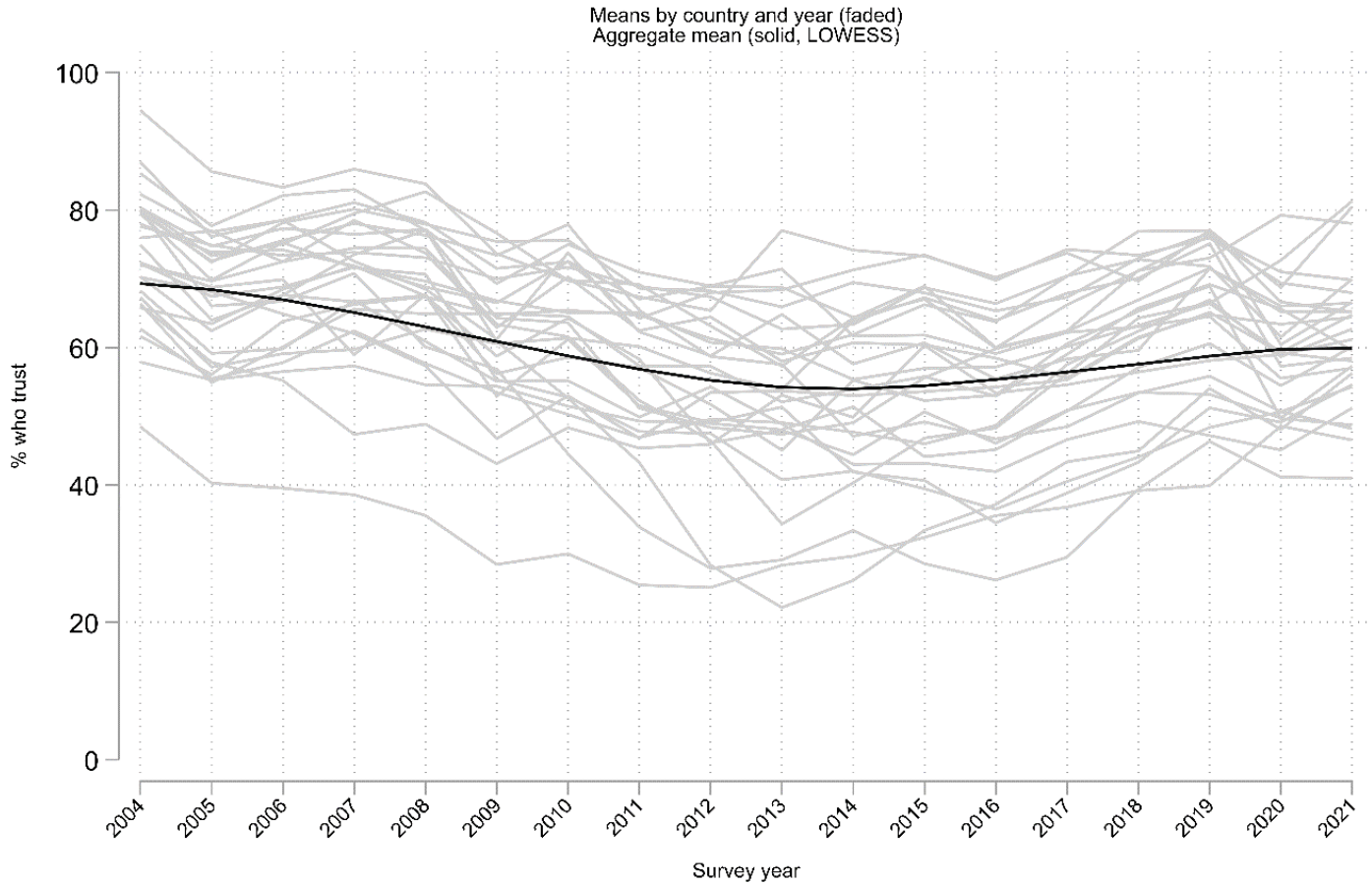
Figure 17 shows the categorization of countries according to the trend patterns shown in Table 3. Four countries display trendless fluctuations (Malta, Denmark, Finland, and The Netherlands), which is again a rather low number of countries.

Trust has been decreasing in a linear pattern in four countries: Estonia, Bulgaria, Cyprus, and Slovakia. It is noticeable that the same countries exhibited a decreasing trend in trust in the EU in general as well, showing that these countries seem to be developing more Eurosceptic attitudes.

The clearest finding is that in most countries, trust in the EP has either fully or partially recovered after the effects of the financial crisis in the late 2000s. Trust in the EP has fully recovered in seven countries: Ireland, Portugal, Germany, Latvia, Croatia, Austria, and the UK. Partial recovery has been made in 12 countries: in Lithuania, Luxembourg, Romania, Hungary, Belgium, Poland, Italy, Spain, Slovenia, Czechia, France, and Greece. Altogether in 20 out of the 28 countries, despite decreases in trust over the period under review, citizens' trust in the EP have been at least somewhat recovered or increased.

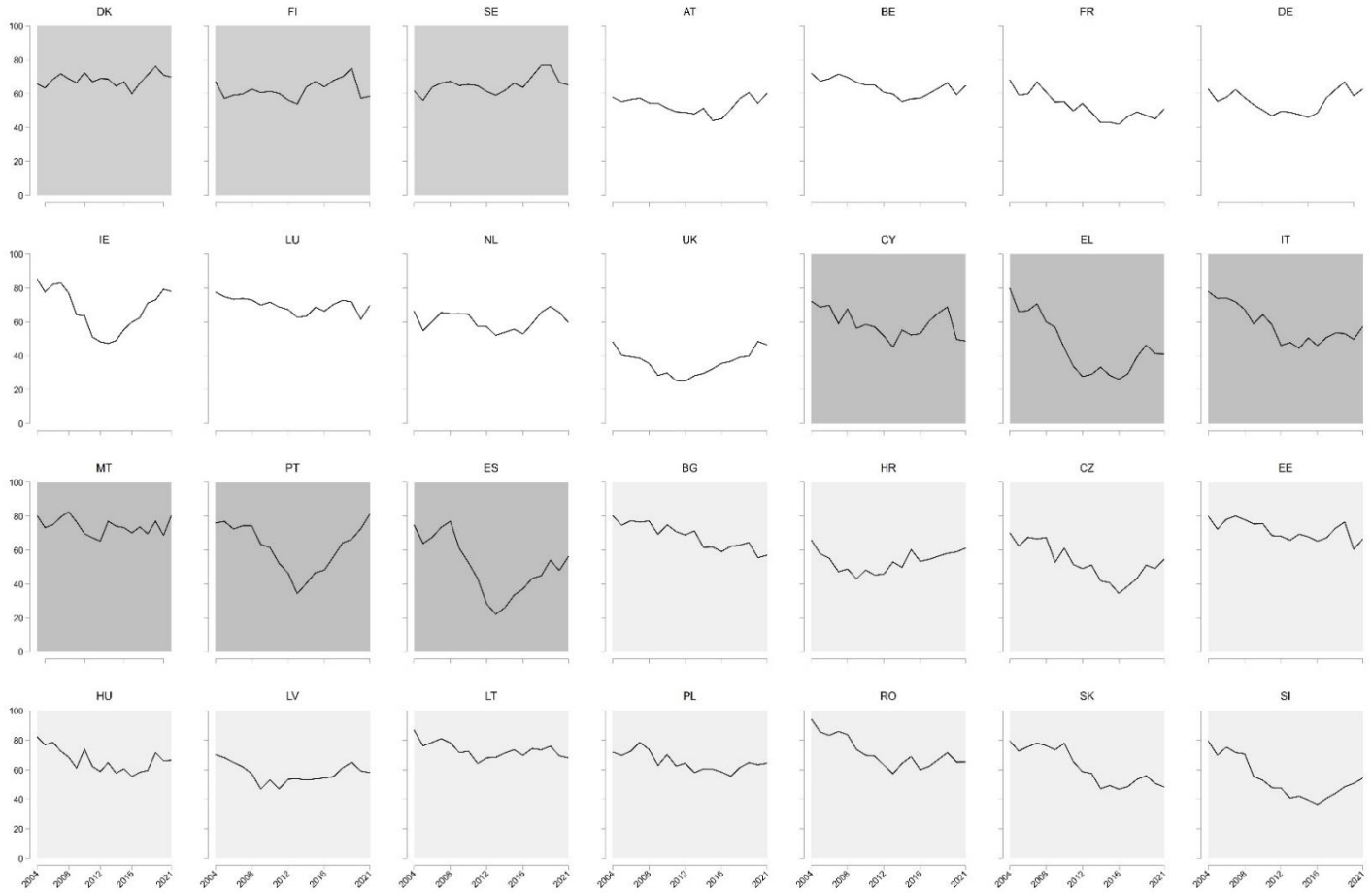
It is only in Sweden that has experienced a linear increase in trust over the near 20-year period. Notable is also that in the countries that were hit the hardest by the economic crises, trust has (at least partially) recovered.

Figure 15. Developments in trust in the European Parliament (EP), 2004–2021. (Janette Huttunen & Henrik Serup Christensen)



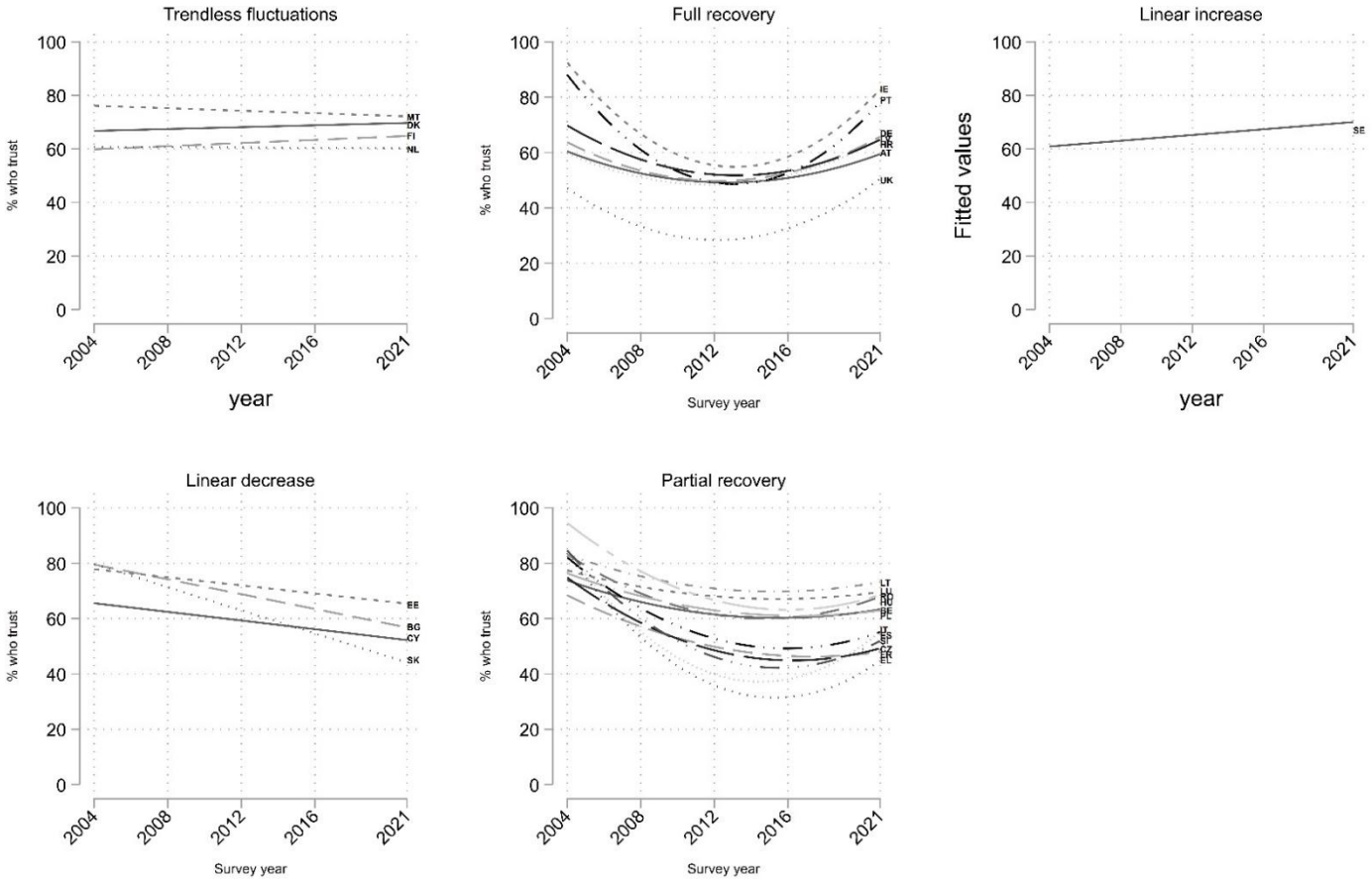
Source: Harmonized Eurobarometer (Russo and Bräutigam, 2023)

Figure 16. Mean trust in the European Parliament (EP) by country and year, 2004–2021. (Janette Huttunen & Henrik Serup Christensen)



Source: Harmonized Eurobarometer (Russo and Bräutigam, 2023)

Figure 17. Trends in trust in the European Parliament (EP) in five categories, 2004–2021. (Janette Huttunen & Henrik Serup Christensen)



Source: Harmonized Eurobarometer (Russo and Bräutigam, 2023)

5.4 Trust in the European Commission

For trust in the Commission, Figure 18 shows the developments the percentages of people who trust the Commission in each country and year, while the darker line represents the aggregated mean value.

There is again considerable variation among the countries. In some countries trust has been at a high level throughout, up to 90% of citizens tend to trust the Commission while in other countries as few as 20 % tend to trust the Commission. The pattern resembles the results for the EP. There is not a pronounced decrease in trust as was evident for the EU in general. However, trust in the Commission decreased in many countries in 2020 and recovered again in 2021, which is most likely a Covid-19 effect also for the Commission.

The aggregated mean value was higher in 2004 (slightly under 70%) than in 2021 (around 60%). Trust in the Commission was at its lowest in 2013, but there is also some evidence of recovery in the last years. As for the EP, trust in the Commission is higher than in the EU in general.

Figure 19 shows the development of trust in the Commission by country clusters over the timeline. The patterns of trust are very similar to those of the EP. In the Nordic countries trust in the Commission is around 60 %. The pattern is similar since trust is rather stable with increasing trust in the late 2010s and a small decrease in trust in the 2020s.

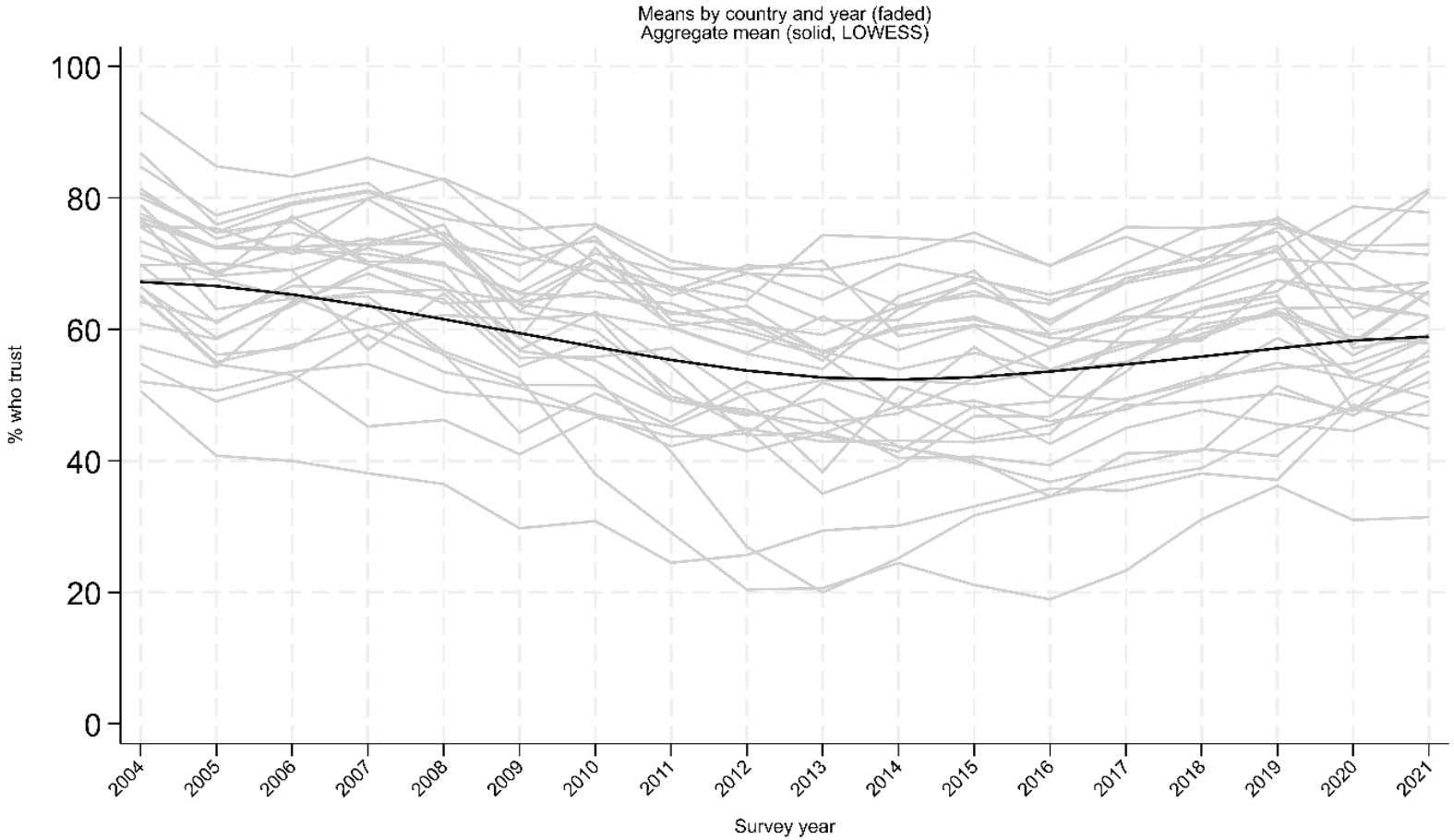
In Western Europe, the fluctuations are again similar in most countries, except for the UK and Ireland. However, trust in the Commission also increased in Ireland after the financial crisis and is now on par with most other countries in this cluster. As for the EP, there was a slight decrease in trust in 2020, with an increase in trust again in 2021, except for Ireland, The Netherlands, and the UK where the trend was the opposite. Nevertheless, this could again indicate a Covid-19 effect on trust in the Commission.

In Southern Europe, trust in the Commission has again been high in Malta, but there was a decrease in trust after the financial and debt crises, even if the drop was small compared to the rest of the Southern European countries. In the rest of the countries, trust in the Commission decreased heavily due to the financial and debt crises. In some countries the trust appears to be restored (Portugal), while in other countries (e.g., Greece), the trust continues to be lower than before the economic crises. We see similar Covid-19 effects for trust in the Commission as with the EP in most Southern European countries with a decrease in trust in 2020 followed by an upturn in 2021.

In Central and Eastern Europe, trust in the Commission has generally been high. Even if levels of trust over time have come closer to the European average in some countries (Slovakia, Slovenia, Czechia, Latvia), trust in the Commission is still higher and more stable than in Southern Europe. Like with the EP, there is no drop in trust after the financial crisis in the Central and Eastern European country cluster. There is also no visible drop in trust in 2020. This is remarkable since the Commission was responsible for coordinating the EU's Covid-19 response – yet the presumed Covid-19 effect is not similarly visible here. A possible interpretation is that people do not distinguish between different institutions and their specific actions, probably due to low awareness, but use the rating of the EU to signal general dissatisfaction with European integration.

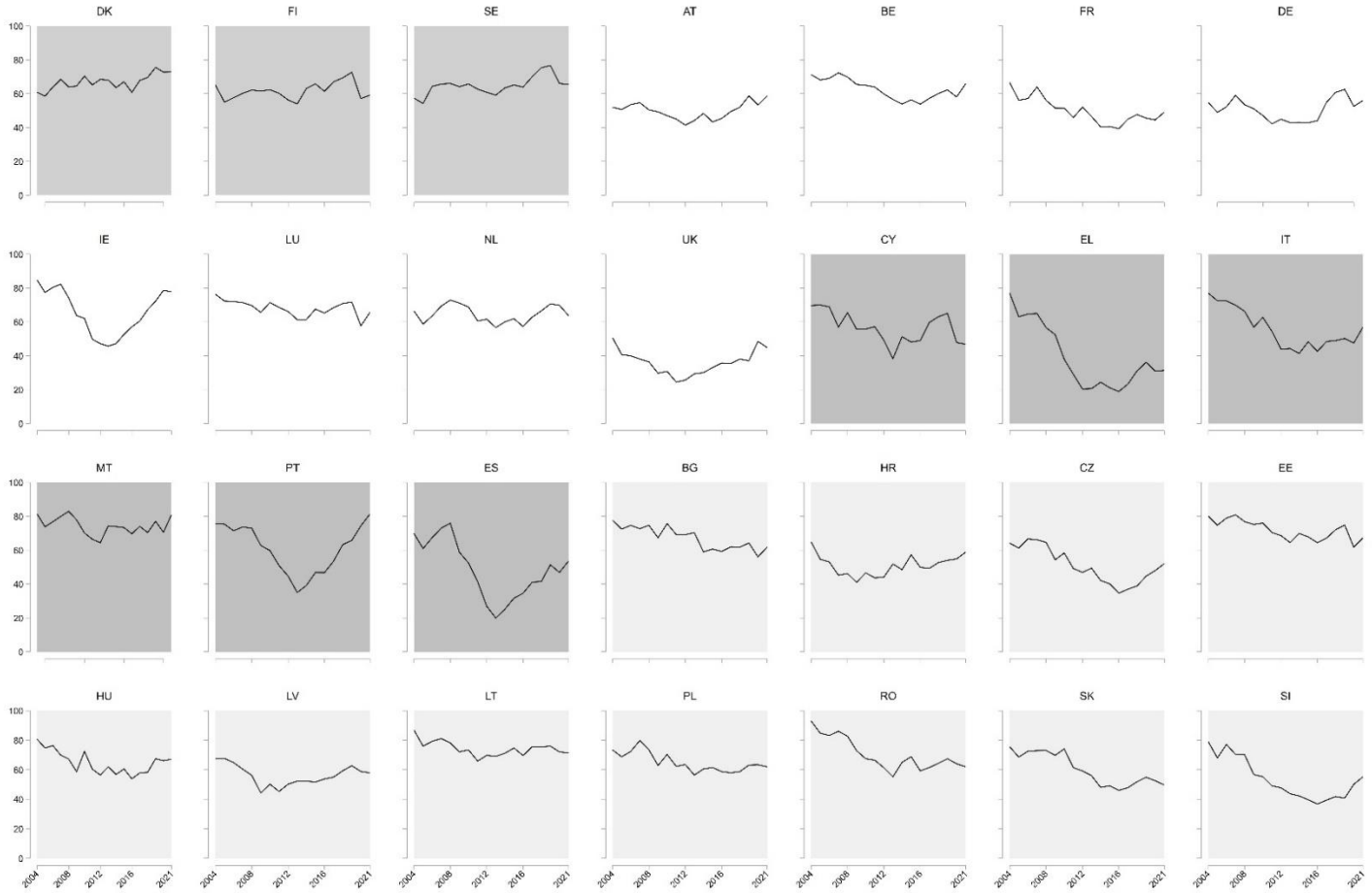
The final step involves classifying countries according to their trends in Figure 20. For the Commission, it is only in The Netherlands where there is a pattern of trendless fluctuations, while trust decreased in Luxembourg, Bulgaria, Estonia, and Slovakia. This was also the case for the EP and the EU for Bulgaria, Estonia, and Slovakia, showing that these countries have become more Eurosceptic during this time, albeit from a relatively high level of trust. As for the previous items, most countries experienced either a partial or full recovery of trust in the Commission, meaning that after a drop the level of trust has been increasing in recent years. Full recoveries occurred in Austria, Germany, Ireland, the UK, Malta, Portugal, Croatia, Latvia and partial recoveries in Belgium, France, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Spain, Czechia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovenia. Hence trust in the Commission recovered in 20 out of the 28 countries. Trust in the Commission increased in Finland, Sweden, and Denmark meaning that trust again increased in all Nordic countries.

Figure 18. Developments in trust in the European Commission, 2004–2021. (Janette Huttunen & Henrik Serup Christensen)



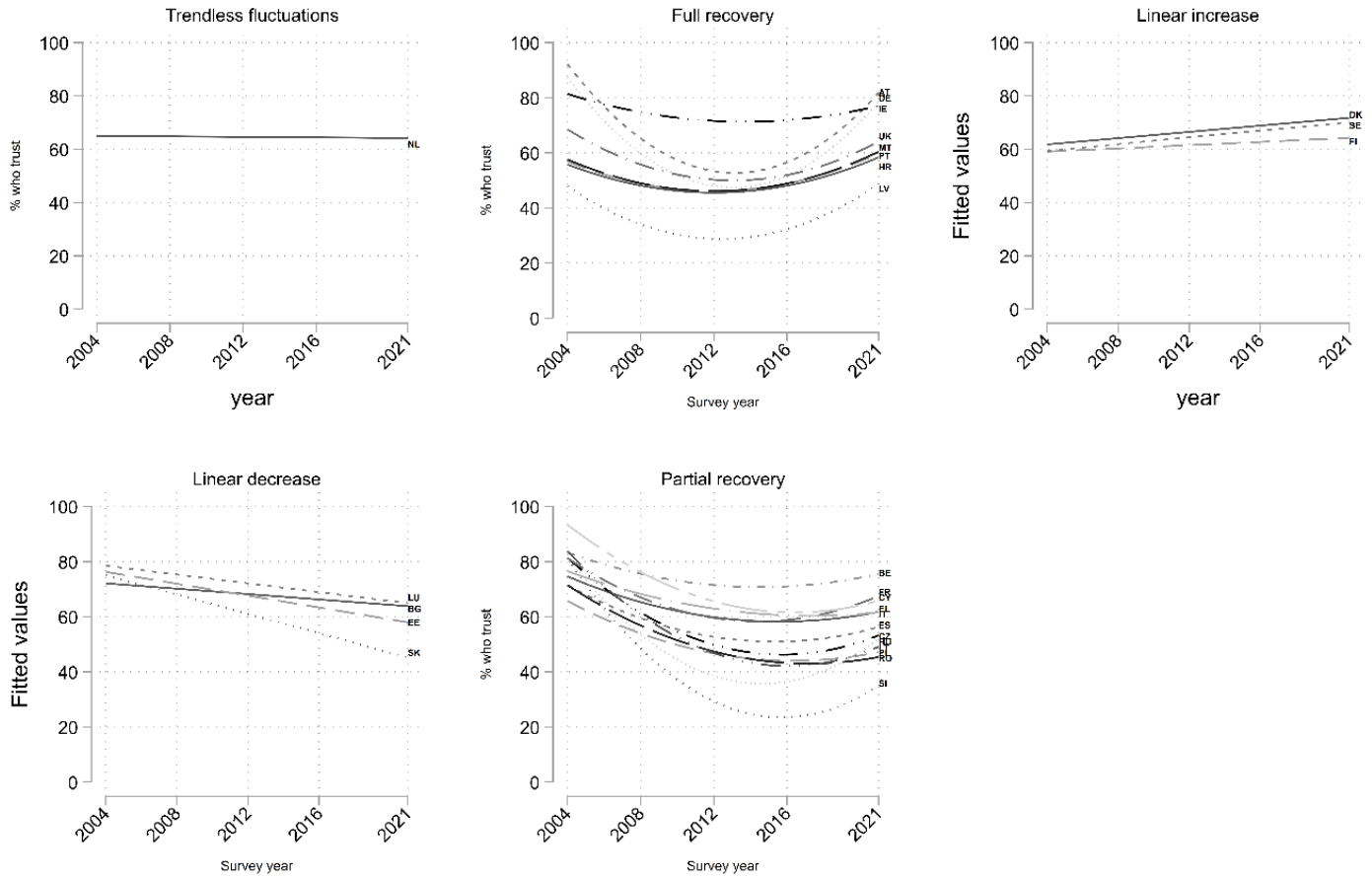
Source: Harmonized Eurobarometer (Russo and Bräutigam, 2023)

Figure 19. Mean trust in the European Commission by country and year, 2004–2021. (Janette Huttunen & Henrik Serup Christensen)



Note: Countries displayed within the following regions (grouped by shade tone): Nordic, Western Europe, Southern Europe, Former Communist Countries of Central and Eastern Europe. *Source: Harmonized Eurobarometer (Russo and Bräutigam, 2023)*

Figure 20. Trends in trust in the European Commission by country and year, 2004–2021. (Janette Huttunen & Henrik Serup Christensen)



Source: Harmonized Eurobarometer (Russo and Bräutigam, 2023)

5.5 Developments in trust at the European level: a summary

We have examined the developments of trust in the EU and its core institutions. The results showed that the financial crisis of 2008 and its aftermath with debt crisis in the Eurozone in the early 2010s had a massive impact on levels of trust in many countries. Previous research shows that economic performance is important determinant for people's trust, and that the economic crises affected citizens' trust in political institutions in countries where the economy was severely impacted (Kroknes et al., 2015), which may help explain the steep decrease in trust in especially Southern Europe and Ireland.

Nevertheless, it is also a noteworthy finding that in many countries, trust levels have fully or partially recovered after the economic turmoil. This is especially true in the most severely affected countries. This is important, as there have been worries over the long-term effects of the financial and debt crises on institutional trust. This is in line with the findings of Devine and Valgarðsson (2023), who, at the individual level, find that levels of trust may be volatile in the short run, but they tend to return to equilibrium after some time. Our findings suggest that this may also hold true at the national level, as the EU member states seem to return to prior levels even when hit by major economic crises.

Other than this, we observe heterogeneity in the developments of trust between countries, although similar trends across country clusters are also observable. Geographical context is not just a geographical context – shared culture and historical legacies also play a role in the institutional trust developments. Our findings also suggest that people trust the EU institutions more than the EU in general. The trust in the EP and the Commission were in all analyses on a higher level than trust in the EU. One possibility for this is that the measure for trust in the EU reflects general Eurosceptic attitudes while trust in specific actors is linked to specific actions and events.

Despite this recovery, economic crises are important factors for understanding developments in trust at the EU level. In the aftermath of the financial and debt crises, trust in European-level actors was affected negatively regardless of how much a specific country was affected. However, in countries where the crises affected people's everyday lives by creating unemployment and poverty, the decrease in trust was steeper. This could indicate that effects on private lives are more important determinants of developments in trust. To some extent, this may seem self-evident; But the Eurozone debt crisis also led to public debate in the countries that had to pay for the bailout packages, even if citizens did not directly suffer the consequences from austerity (Egner et al., 2024). This debate even created tensions since many were dissatisfied with having to contribute to helping others out. This dissatisfaction could have created persistent traces of lower trust in European-level actors in the creditor countries as well. However, the results here indicate that dissatisfaction with the bailout packages did not leave any impact even in the very short term. Furthermore, looking at the dynamics between the so-called EU contributors and beneficiaries[3] and the patterns of trust, we see that many contributors have high trust in the EU, even increasing trust as in the Nordic

[3] Some countries pay more than they benefit (contributors) from the EU, while other benefit more than they pay (beneficiaries). In the 2021 EU budget, the biggest contributors were (in order) Germany, France, The Netherlands, Italy, Sweden, Denmark, Austria, Finland, and Ireland. The UK was also part of this group before it left the EU. The biggest beneficiaries were Poland, Greece, Hungary, Romania, Portugal, Belgium, Czechia, Luxembourg, Spain, and Croatia. Poland was by far the biggest beneficiary (11.9 billion, compared to e.g. Greece with 4.3 billion). https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/long-term-eu-budget/2014-2020/spending-and-revenue_en

countries. All of this suggests that how much member countries pay for EU is not a determinant for developments in trust, whereas the impact on everyday lives is more likely to matter.

Finally, what happened to trust in 2020 and 2021 may be interpreted as a reaction to EU's Covid-19 response. Although our time series does not allow us to draw any definitive conclusions in the developments, it is interesting to see a drop in trust in 2020 when the pandemic started in many countries, but an immediate return to similar levels in 2021. This pattern may be due to the EU coordination of the pandemic response and vaccines. The initial response to the spread of Covid-2019 in early 2020 was very much a national matter, while the open boarders associated with the EU were seen as a threat. This could explain the initial negative impact on trust. But European efforts to develop, produce and disseminate vaccines to EU countries was spearheaded by EU, along with a recovery plan to support its member states in the recovery from the economic downturn caused by the pandemic. As the Covid-19 vaccinations started in December 2020 across the EU, this success may help explain the quick recovery of trust. Future research should examine how the Covid-19 pandemic and national and European responses affected levels of trust in the long run.

Overall, our findings do not support neither a uniform decline in political trust at the European level, but the trends also do not conform to trendless fluctuations. Instead, it is necessary to be aware of more subtle historical legacies and patterns of trust to understand the trajectories of trust in EU member states. All of this supports the notion that trust in the European level should not be understood as a continuation of trust at the national level.

6 Developments in political trust over time at the national level

Carles Pamies and Laura Morales

6.1 Introduction

As has been discussed in previous chapters, the literature has emphasised the importance of high levels of political trust as a factor that facilitates the functioning of democracies. Additionally, it has been argued that the levels of political trust are not necessarily immune to the dynamics of multi-level governance, and that trust across different levels might be dependent on the national context (Proszowska et al., 2022). For these reasons, in this chapter, we examine in detail the developments in trust at the national level. The data comprises the period between 2004 and 2022[4] in the 28 Member States that were part of the EU at any point during the period.

The data used consists of two cross-national and cross-sectional surveys, analysed using the appropriate weights. Firstly, we analyse all the Eurobarometer studies included in the harmonised Eurobarometer (HEB) between 2004 and 2021 (Russo and Bräutigam, 2023) for the trust indicators covering the legislative and the executive branches of government (with "nation"[5] weights). Secondly, due to data limitations of the HEB that have been discussed already in chapters 3 and 4, we analyse the judicial branch and two sets of political actors (politicians and political parties) using the European Social Survey (ESS) waves that covered the period studied (with design and population weights,[6] see Kaminska, 2020). These analyses start with the second ESS round (2004–2006) up to the tenth round (2020–2022).[7] The selection of these indicators seeks to include the three main branches of government, while also incorporating key political actors to better understand citizens' political trust.

Unlike for trust in the EU institutions, the results provide evidence of varying patterns of trust depending on the institutions about which respondents were asked. In particular, we find lower levels of trust in political actors and higher in the legal system, while the levels of trust in the executive and legislative branches are somewhere in between. However, we also find evidence that trust in the national parliament and the national government has been deteriorating over the years, as compared to the trust placed in political actors and the national legal system, which has either remained stable or improved during the period.

The data are presented in a similar way to the analyses for EU institutions in Chapter 5, and findings are displayed through separate analyses for each indicator with three different visualisations by country and year: first, a single graph showing the smoothed line of mean trust in the given institution or actor; second, a graph with the mean trust for countries plotted individually; and

[4] Depending on the data source and the country, the coverage includes either up to 2021 (Eurobarometer) or the fieldwork year of the European Social Survey for the tenth round (2020-2022).

[5] The weight variable used in the HEB was "wnation" for all countries, except for Germany (wnationGE) and the UK (wnationGB).

[6] The weight variable used in the ESS was a combination of "dweight" and "pweight"

[7] Round 11 (2023-2024) was not included as, on June 20, 2024, the first release of the data only included 13 out of the 31 countries included in that wave of the ESS. We decided not to provide incomplete data for this report.

finally, a third graph showing the trends of political trust by specific trend patterns (stable, increasing, decreasing and decreasing with recovery). However, to simplify the interpretation of these patterns, we only include four categories: stable patterns, increasing patterns, and two decreasing patterns (with and without recovery). These patterns were also calculated using both a Pearson correlation coefficient and an ordinary least-squares linear regression with the same specifications (linear and quadratic terms for the survey year), and with two distinct thresholds for the significance level (0.90 for the correlation and 0.95 for the OLS model) to assess the slope and the linearity of the trend line.

6.2 Trust in the National Parliament

Our first analysis examines the developments in trust in the national parliament.[8] As shown in the grey lines of Figure 21, the levels of trust in the national parliament vary substantially across countries, with instances in which trust in the national parliament was above 80% (2007 and 2009), while in others it was as low as 5% (2009 and 2013).

The dark line shows the aggregated mean, for all the countries, of the percentage of respondents who trust, showing a curvilinear trend with lower levels of trust between 2010 and 2016, and an overall decreasing pattern that has not fully recovered the levels of trust in 2004, which was five percentage points above the mean in 2021 (40%). The deviation is high during the period analysed, with 2009 being the year with the highest deviation (75 percentage points), while the lowest is the most recent year (49% in 2021).

After a period of constant but stable decreasing values of trust between 2004 and 2009, the most noticeable drop in the levels of trust in the national parliament was in 2010, when the mean dropped from 39% to 33%, recovering slightly one percentage point in 2011, but falling to an all-time low of 31% in both 2012 and 2013. The recovery in the levels of trust in the national parliament started in 2017 (4% additional percentage points from the 35% in 2016) and has remained stable at around 40% ever since. The average trend for the first half of the period is consistent with the findings in previous comparative studies, which showed that trust in parliaments declined during the 1990s and the first decade of the century (Norris, 2011).

The next graph (Figure 22) shows the unsmoothed lines by countries, using the same geographical categories and order as in previous sections: Nordic countries, Western Europe, Southern Europe, and Central and Eastern Europe. Similarly to the previous graph, this figure suggests that there is widespread variation in the levels of trust, but it also indicates that these differences are small within regions in Europe. Nordic countries show higher levels of trust during the period compared to other countries, and the lowest levels are mostly at the start of the period, while for many other countries, particularly in Southern Europe, the drop in trust occurred right after the financial crisis.

On the other hand, Central and Eastern European countries show much lower levels of trust in their national parliaments (except for Estonia), and the evolution of trust appears to be less connected to the crisis. Southern European countries also show a distinct pattern, particularly those that joined the EU more recently: one in which the levels of trust in their national parliaments are markedly high in the first years, after which they hit a bottom low after the crisis and never fully recovered. However, this is not exactly the case in Malta, where the recovery was steeper. Finally, Western European countries show greater variation and a mix of patterns. Generally, they have quite stable and relatively more moderate levels of trust, but with important differences. Firstly,

[8] For both trust in the national parliament and in the national government, the most recent data can be found in the OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions (OECD, 2024).

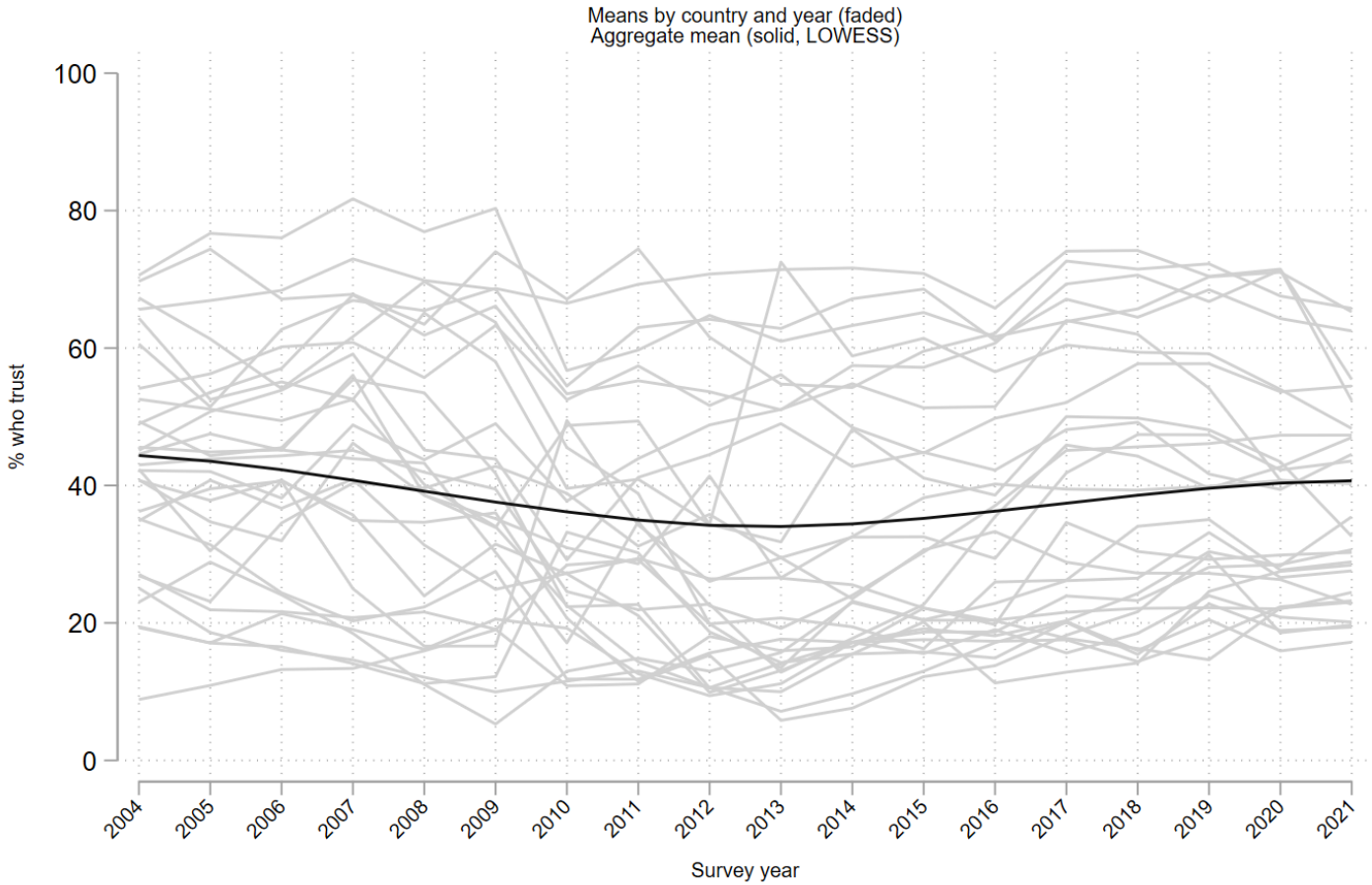
both the UK and Ireland have lower levels of trust that seem to be more affected by the crisis between 2010 and 2016. Secondly, Luxembourg and The Netherlands (and even Austria) have much higher levels of trust, close to the levels of Nordic countries. Thirdly, Germany is distinctly improving in its levels of trust, especially when compared to the mostly stable or declining levels in most of the other countries in the region.

Figure 23 shows the different trends in trust using either linear or curvilinear projections, and it also reveals the great variance in terms of the trend patterns. One-third of the countries (9) show stable (linear) trends, including countries of the four regions. The higher levels of trust correspond to Luxembourg, Finland, and Malta, while in Belgium and Croatia, the levels are similarly stable but much lower. The less frequent patterns include increasing trends and decreasing trends with recovery. Regarding the first group, we find important variation. Only one country, Sweden, shows curvilinear increases (meaning that higher levels of trust were identified during the crisis), while all the other countries are increasing more linearly. We also find variation in terms of the initial and final levels of trust. Germany is the country with the steepest increase, originally at the levels of Hungary but right below Sweden and The Netherlands by 2021, while in Poland the increase was also considerable, but lower throughout the whole period.

Half of the countries experienced some degree of downturn in terms of the trust placed in the national parliament. Most of them show linear or curvilinear reductions, particularly in Southern Europe, but also in Denmark (linear), Slovenia (lows during the crisis), and Slovakia (highs during the crisis). The other group shows curvilinear developments of trust, which suggests a recovery that roughly matched the original levels of trust. Here we identify two distinct groups. First, Ireland and Portugal, with initial and final levels of trust at around the centre of the scale, and second, Latvia, Lithuania and Romania, for which the levels of trust are roughly half of the first two countries.

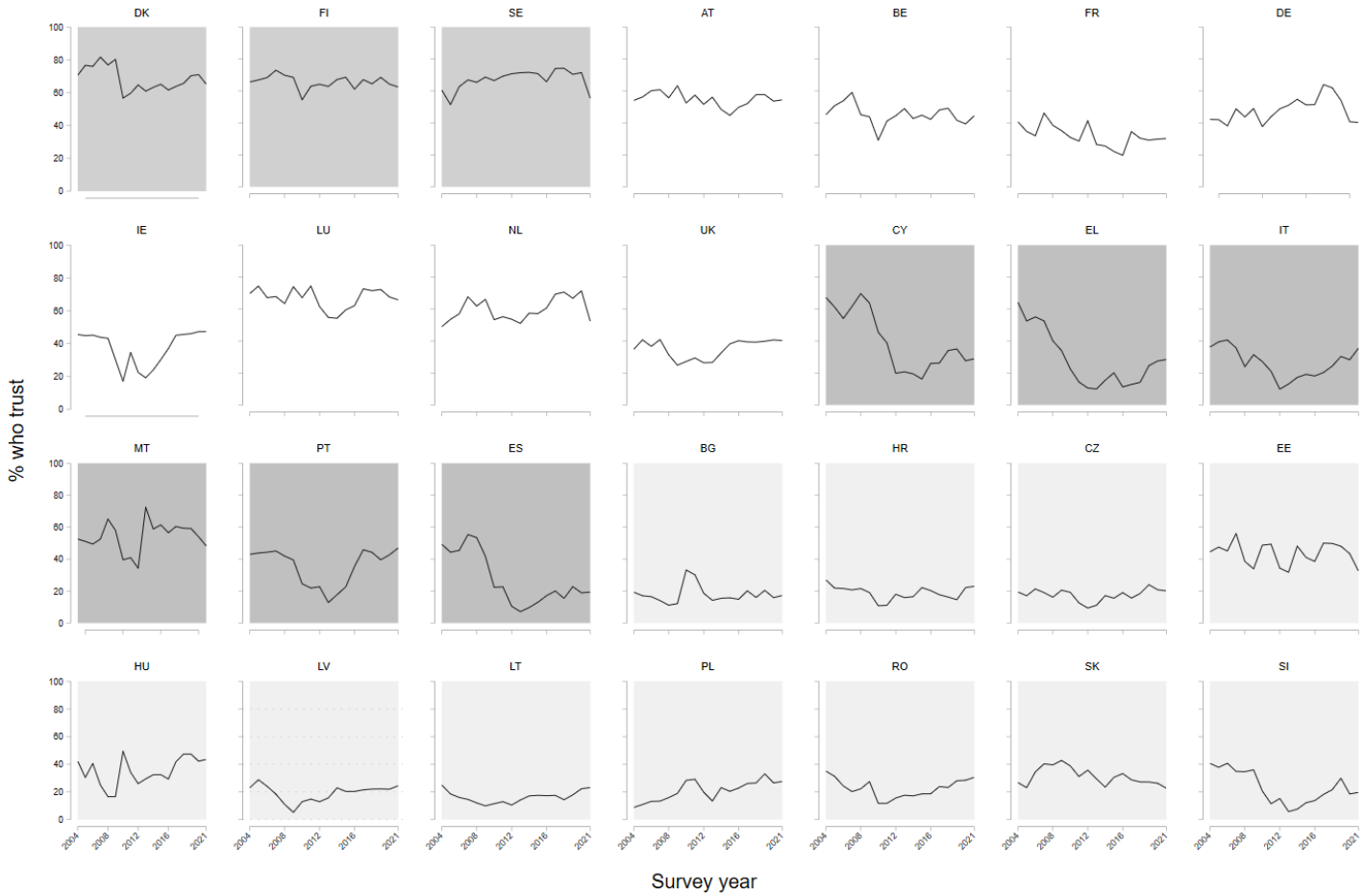
The evidence shown here, on a country-by-country basis, suggests that there have been noticeable changes in the trends of trust in the national parliament since the 1990s. On the one hand, if we compare these results to the evidence of that earlier period (Norris, 2011: 74) we see how countries that were experiencing rising levels of trust in the national parliament in the 1990s and first decade of the 2000s experienced a sudden drop in trust followed by very different paths: from increases (Sweden) to decreases (Denmark) and stabilisation (Belgium). Similarly, countries with noticeable and decreasing levels of trust in the national parliament in that period covered with the 1997–2009 Eurobarometers have evolved quite differently: they either increased (The Netherlands), decreased with (Spain) and without recovery (Portugal, Ireland), or stabilised (UK).

Figure 21. Trust in the national parliament, 2004–2021. (Carles Pamies and Laura Morales)



Source: Harmonized Eurobarometer (Russo and Bräutigam, 2023)

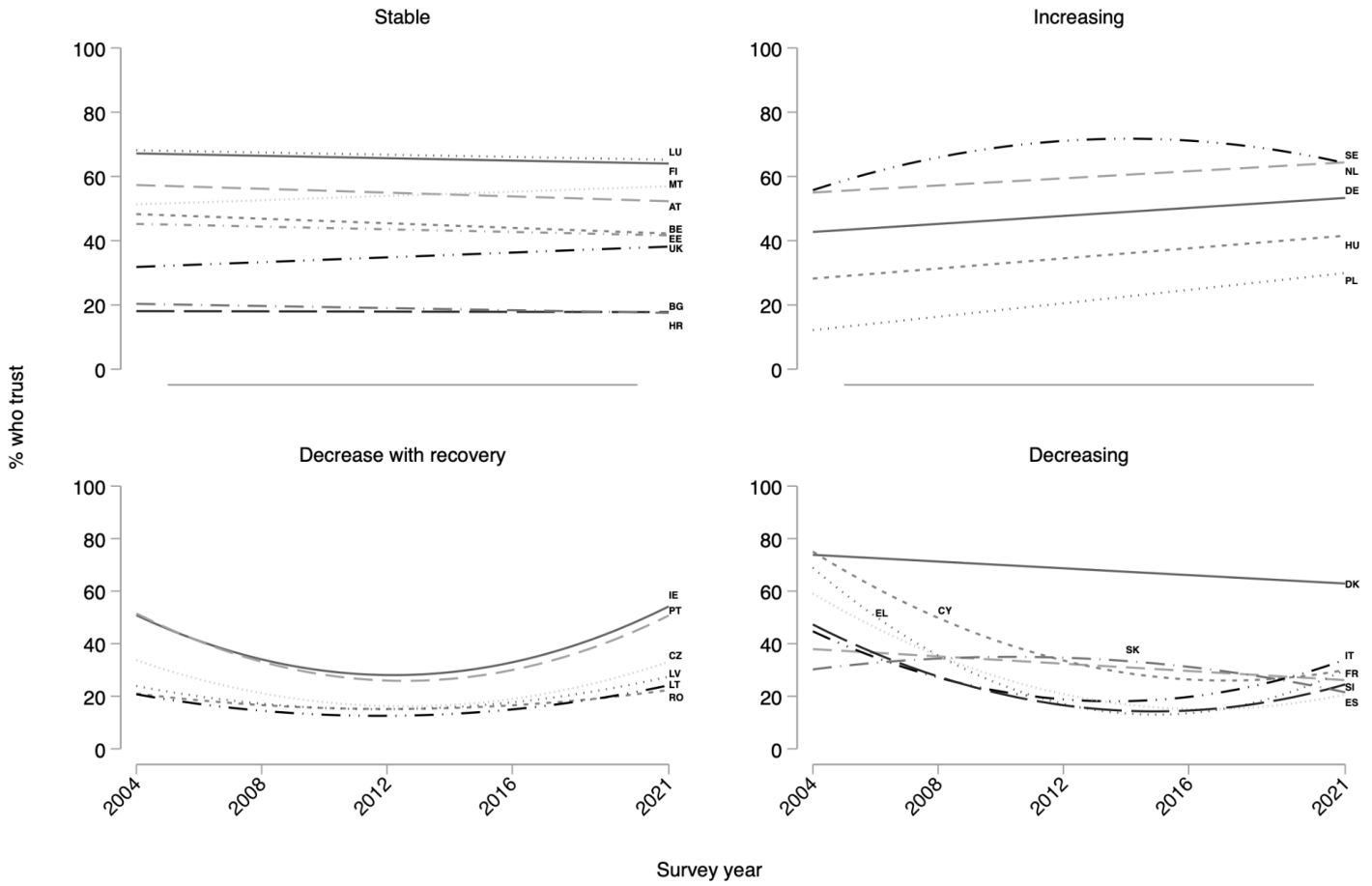
Figure 22. Mean trust in the national parliament by country and year, 2004–2021. (Carles Pamies and Laura Morales)



Note: Countries displayed within the following regions (grouped by shade tone): Nordic, Western Europe, Southern Europe, Former Communist Countries of Central and Eastern Europe

Source: Harmonized Eurobarometer (Russo and Bräutigam, 2023)

Figure 23. Trends of trust in the national parliament by country and year, 2004–2021. (Carles Pamies and Laura Morales)



Source: Harmonized Eurobarometer (Russo and Bräutigam, 2023)

6.3 Trust in the National Government

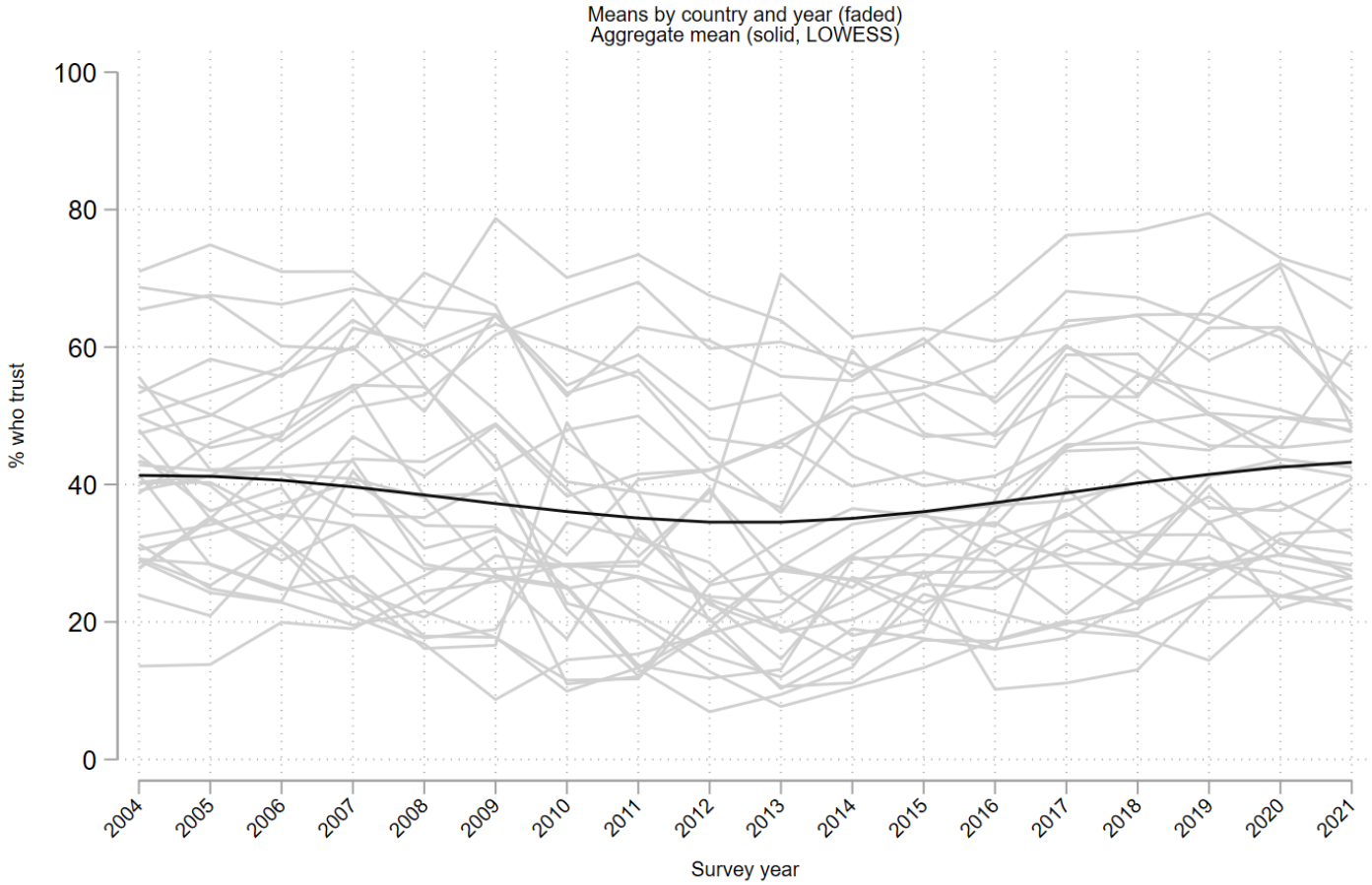
After assessing the levels of trust in the national parliament, we shift our focus to the executive branch, by analysing trust in the national government. Figure 24 shows again the developments in trust in one single plot for all the countries and years, but this time for the national government. This first visualisation shows more outlying cases in more recent years, and slightly less variance during the full period, particularly in the central years. However, the differences do not appear to be substantive, at least in terms of the maximum deviation.

The aggregated mean is remarkably like the equivalent line for trust in the national parliament, although in the case of trust in the national government, the mean is lower in the first years and higher by the end of the period, which is not the case for trust in the national parliament. This suggests that trust in the national government has not just improved more than trust in the national parliament, but that it is also slightly higher than its mean in 2004. These differences between trust in the national government and trust in the national parliament, even if slight, were also anticipated in the literature, where it was demonstrated that citizens differentiate between branches even at the same tier of government (Schnaudt, 2019; Schneider, 2017).

Figure 25 shows the unsmoothed lines by countries and provides an interesting contrast to the more clear-cut results for trust in the national parliament. Here, the respondents in Nordic countries appear to be less trusting of the national government than of their respective national parliaments overall, and countries such as Sweden in 2005 and Denmark in 2013 report levels of trust in the national government below 40% during certain periods. In Western Europe, the trends are remarkably close to those for the national parliament, which is also applicable to most countries of the rest of the regions: higher values of trust in the national government in the early years for Southern European countries and generally lower levels in former Communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Some other cases stand out in this comparison between the legislative and the executive branches. One is Portugal, which showed markedly lower levels of trust in the national government in 2004 and improved the initial values, compared to the curvilinear and stable trend for trust in the national parliament. The other one is Lithuania, which has experienced more variation in trust in the national government, particularly between 2004 and 2016. These results complement the findings found by Norris regarding West European countries, and suggest, for instance, that the high and negative net changes between 1997 and 2009 for countries like the UK and Portugal have reduced in size, while in other countries such as Greece and Spain the levels of trust in the national government have not recovered (Norris, 2011: 71).

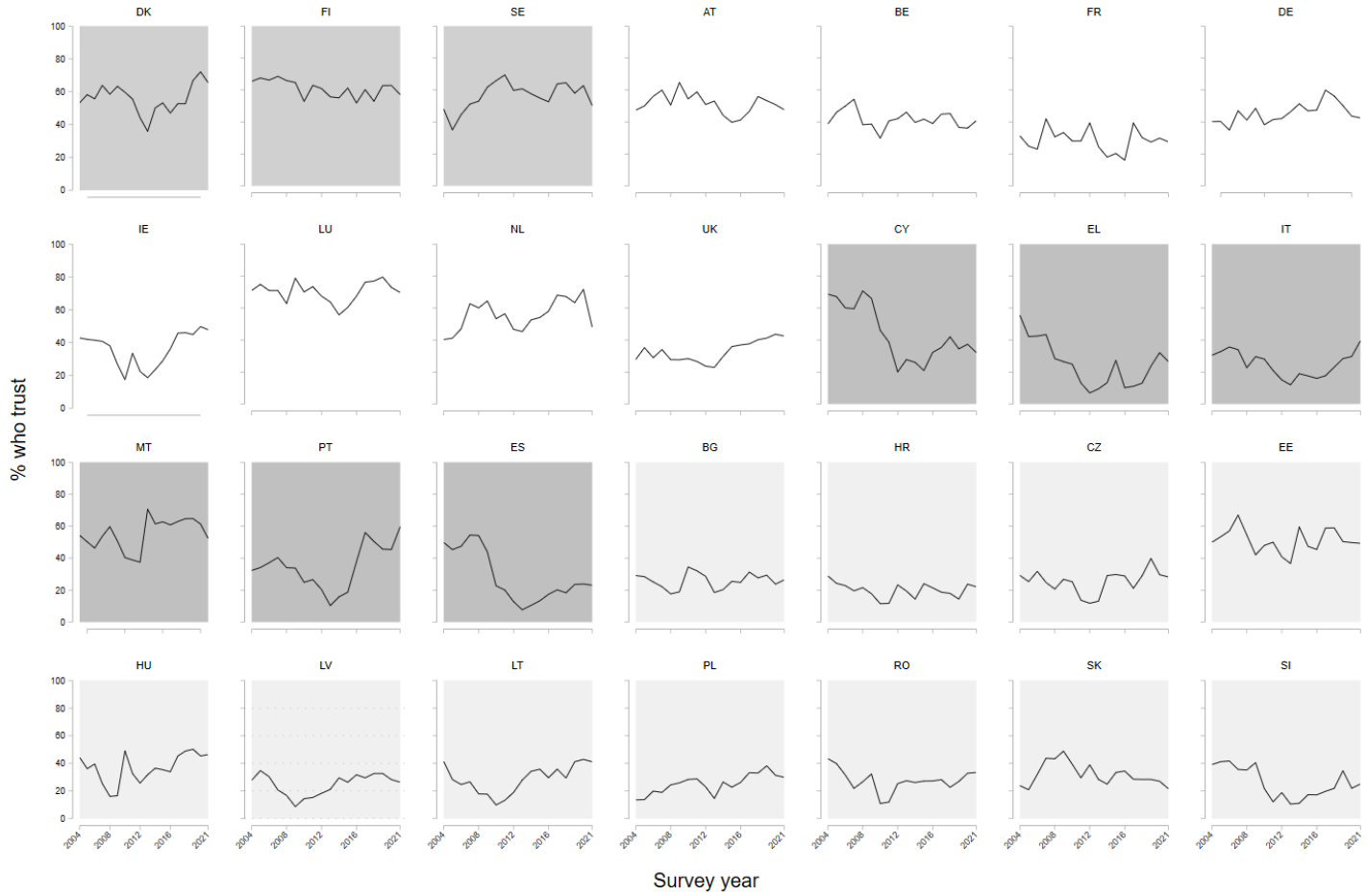
The final graph of this section in Figure 26 shows that even if trust in the national government is slightly more similar across countries, there is less stability in trends. Only one-fifth of the countries have remained stable (compared to one-third of countries for trust in the national parliament), and the opposite is true in terms of improvements. There are substantial improvements in trust in the national government in one-third of the countries, compared to less than 18% of countries regarding trust in the national parliament. Combined, these results suggest that trends in trust in the national government are more alike across EU countries and that trust in national governments has timidly improved generally speaking compared to trust in the national parliament.

Figure 24. Trust in the national government, 2004–2021. (Carles Pamies and Laura Morales)



Source: Harmonized Eurobarometer (Russo and Bräutigam, 2023)

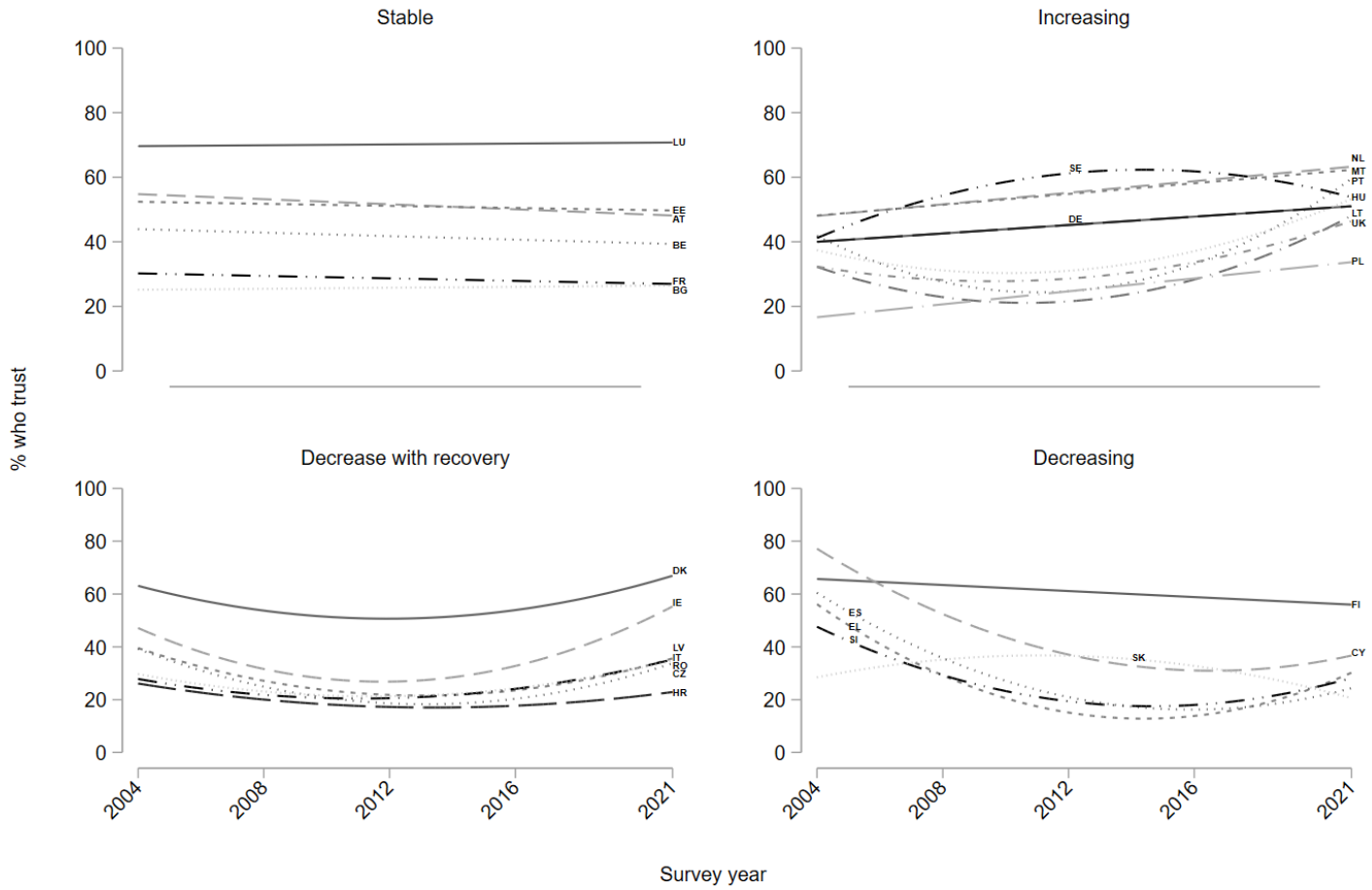
Figure 25. Mean trust in the national government by country and year, 2004–2021. (Carles Pamies and Laura Morales)



Note: Countries displayed within the following regions (grouped by shade tone): Nordic, Western Europe, Southern Europe, Former Communist Countries of Central and Eastern Europe

Source: Harmonized Eurobarometer (Russo and Bräutigam, 2023)

Figure 26. Trends of trust in the national government by country and year, 2004–2021. (Carles Pamies and Laura Morales)



Source: Harmonized Eurobarometer (Russo and Bräutigam, 2023)

6.4 Trust in the National Legal System

The data on trust in the national legal system comes from the European Social Survey (ESS) due to data limitations of the HEB and uses a different, yet fairly comparable, scale. The options given to the respondents of the ESS offered a 0-10 scale on this item, as well as in the following two (trust in politicians and in political parties). Therefore, the vertical axis shows the mean trust in the legal system, with 0 being the lowest and 10 the highest.

Figure 27 shows our initial visualisation of the developments in trust in the legal system. The nature of the available data reduces the number of data points for specific countries and years, which are described at the bottom of the graph. These are particularly noticeable for Malta (no data), Luxembourg and Romania (only one wave), and Greece and Latvia (only three time points). The missing cases also affect the trends, which are less abrupt due to reasons that are potentially exogenous to the actual (unobserved) levels of trust.

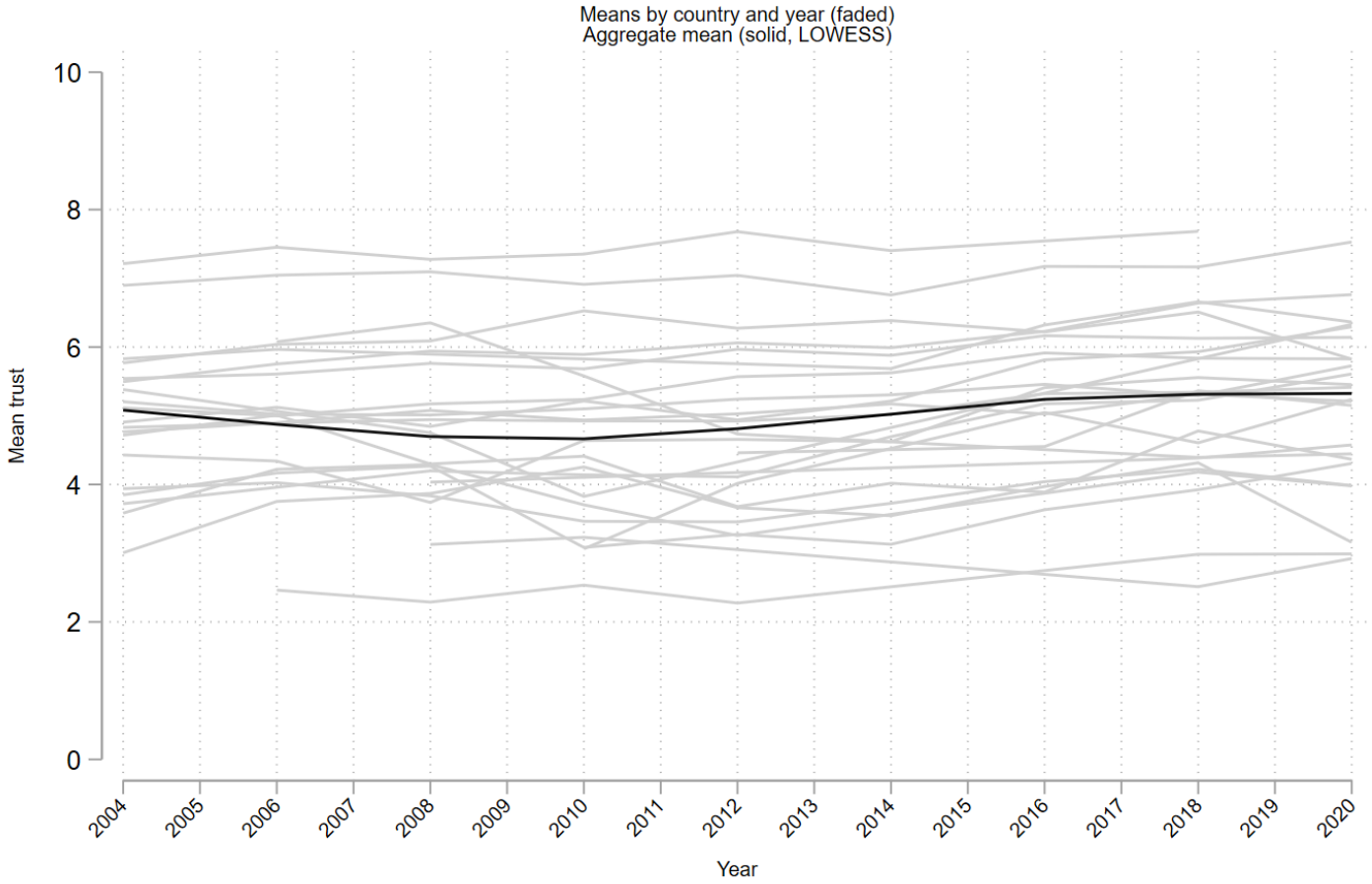
Overall, the levels of trust in the judicial system are higher and more similar across countries, when compared to the levels of trust in the national executive and legislative branches. The aggregate mean is around 5 on the 0-10 scale, and even if the highest values appear to be lower (below 8 points), there are no cases below 2, and most countries are well above 3.5 points.

The next graph on the mean trust in the legal system plotted by countries slightly differs from the previous ones in one aspect. In this case, Figure 28 shows countries with a discontinuous line representing the countries which have at least one missing wave in the ESS. This affects mostly the countries in Central and Eastern Europe, but also a few Southern European countries, plus Denmark (missing waves 8 and 10), Austria (missing waves 4, 5 and 6) and Luxembourg (only one wave available).

The graph shows again that Nordic countries tend to trust their legal system more than the rest, particularly Denmark and Finland. In Western Europe, Austria, Germany, and The Netherlands are countries with higher levels of trust in the legal system. Southern European countries fluctuate more than the countries in the first two regions, and this variation takes many different forms: in Cyprus an important decline, in Greece an increase, and in Portugal and Spain a more stable and curvilinear trend. The last group of countries also shows variation. As in previous items, Estonia has higher levels of trust, which are more clearly increasing in this case, and the growth pattern is also visible for Czechia, Hungary, and Lithuania. Overall, these trends suggest that there have been important changes in the patterns of trust in the legal system if we compare them with the existing data in the 1990s (Bühlmann and Kunz, 2011). Denmark, Finland, and Sweden still have relatively high scores, but Austria had markedly higher levels of trust in the legal system in the 1990s (particularly compared to Sweden), and Greece was slightly above countries such as the Netherlands, which is not the case now, at least until recent years. Another contrasting case is Czechia, where the levels of trust in the judicial system are much higher than two decades prior.

The last graph for trust in the legal system gives a clear idea of the more positive orientations towards these institutions. Figure 29 presents a generally stable or increasing trend, with most countries converging more than in other items, except for Croatia in the group of stable countries and Bulgaria in the increasing ones. The graph also clearly shows that negative trends are fairly uncommon (only in Cyprus) and that the occasional reductions of trust in the legal systems were preceded by previous improvements (Sweden).

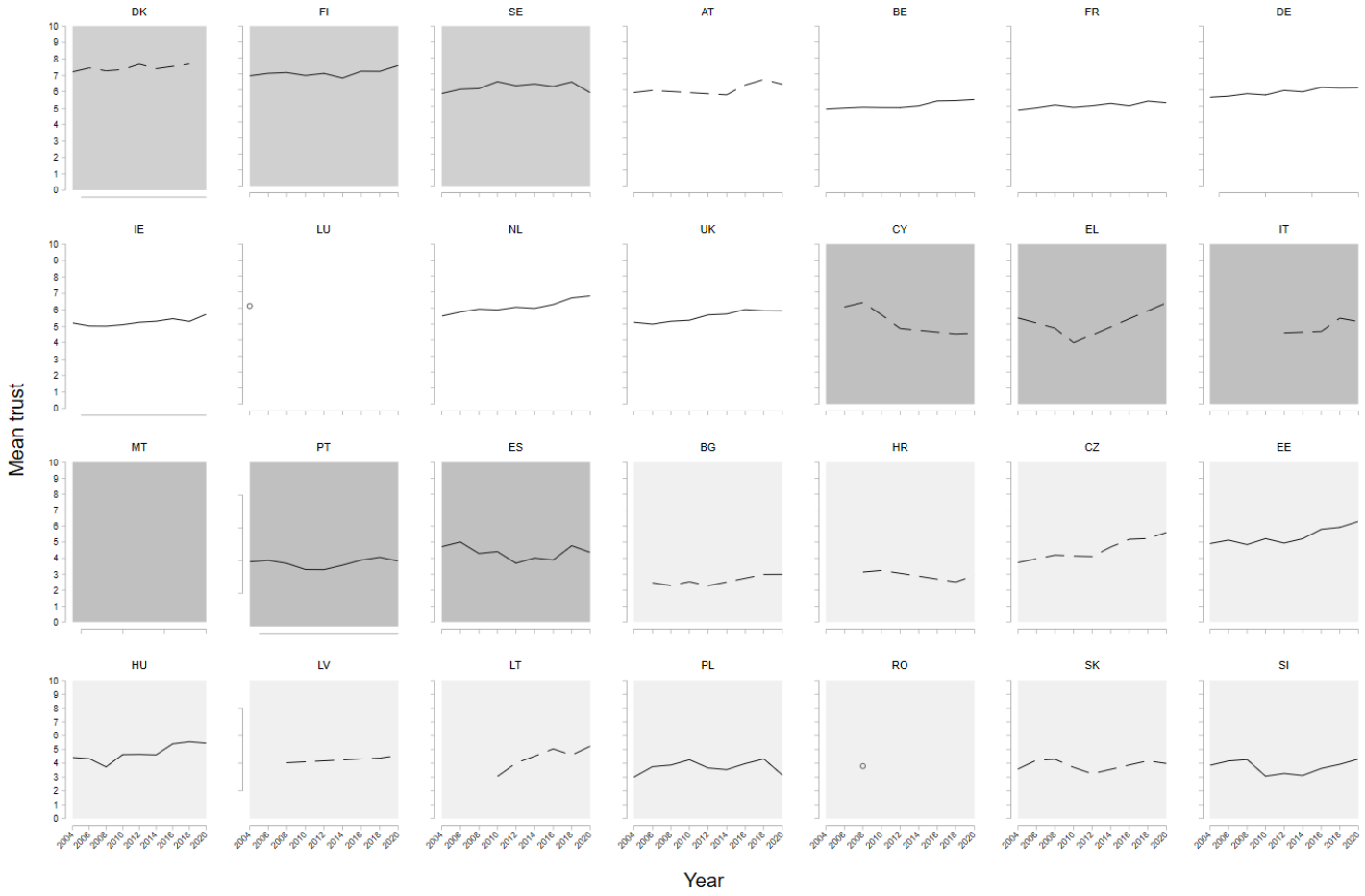
Figure 27. Trust in the legal system by year, 2004–2020. (Carles Pamies and Laura Morales)



Note: missing cases include MT (no data), and the specific waves of DK 8 & 10, AT 4-6, LU 3-10, CY 2 & 7-8, EL 3 & 6-9, IT 2-5 & 7, BG 2 & 7-8, HR 2-3 & 6-8, CZ 3, LV 2-3 & 5-8, LT 2-4, RO 2-3 & 5-10, SK 7-8. The year refers to the first year of the ESS round.

Source: European Social Survey

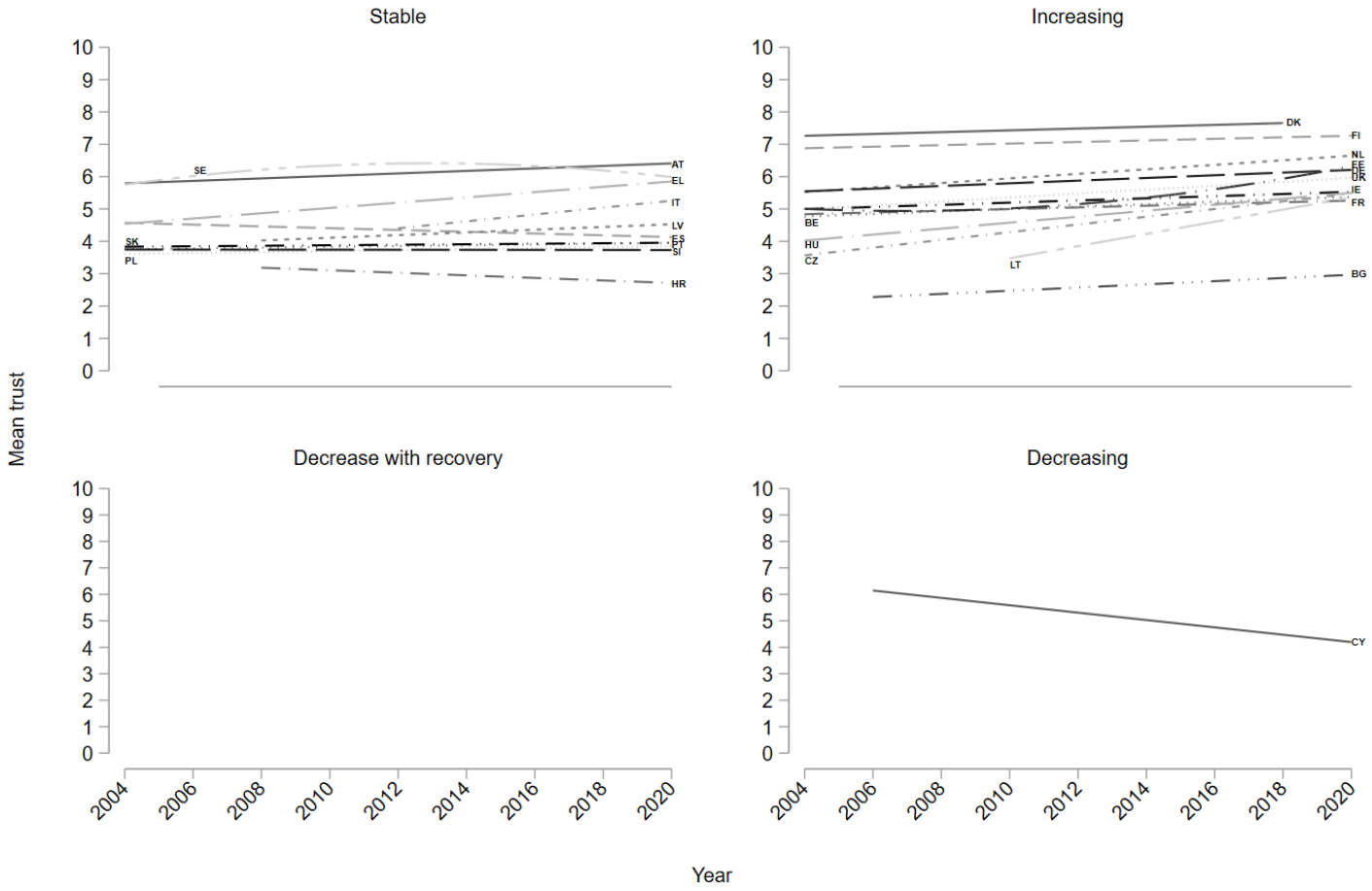
Figure 28. Mean trust in the legal system by country and year, 2004–2020. (Carles Pamies and Laura Morales)



Note: Countries displayed within the following regions (grouped by shade tone): Nordic, Western Europe, Southern Europe, Former Communist Countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Missing cases include MT (no data), and the specific waves of DK 8 & 10, AT 4-6, LU 3-10, CY 2 & 7-8, EL 3 & 6-9, IT 2-5 & 7, BG 2 & 7-8, HR 2-3 & 6-8, CZ 3, LV 2-3 & 5-8, LT 2-4, RO 2-3 & 5-10, SK 7-8. The year refers to the first year of the ESS round.

Source: European Social Survey

Figure 29. Trends of trust in the legal system by country and year, 2004–2020. (Carles Pamies and Laura Morales)



Note: missing cases include MT (no data), and the specific waves of DK 8 & 10, AT 4-6, LU 3-10, CY 2 & 7-8, EL 3 & 6-9, IT 2-5 & 7, BG 2 & 7-8, HR 2-3 & 6-8, CZ 3, LV 2-3 & 5-8, LT 2-4, RO 2-3 & 5-10, SK 7-8. The year refers to the first year of the ESS round.

Source: European Social Survey

6.5 Trust in Politicians

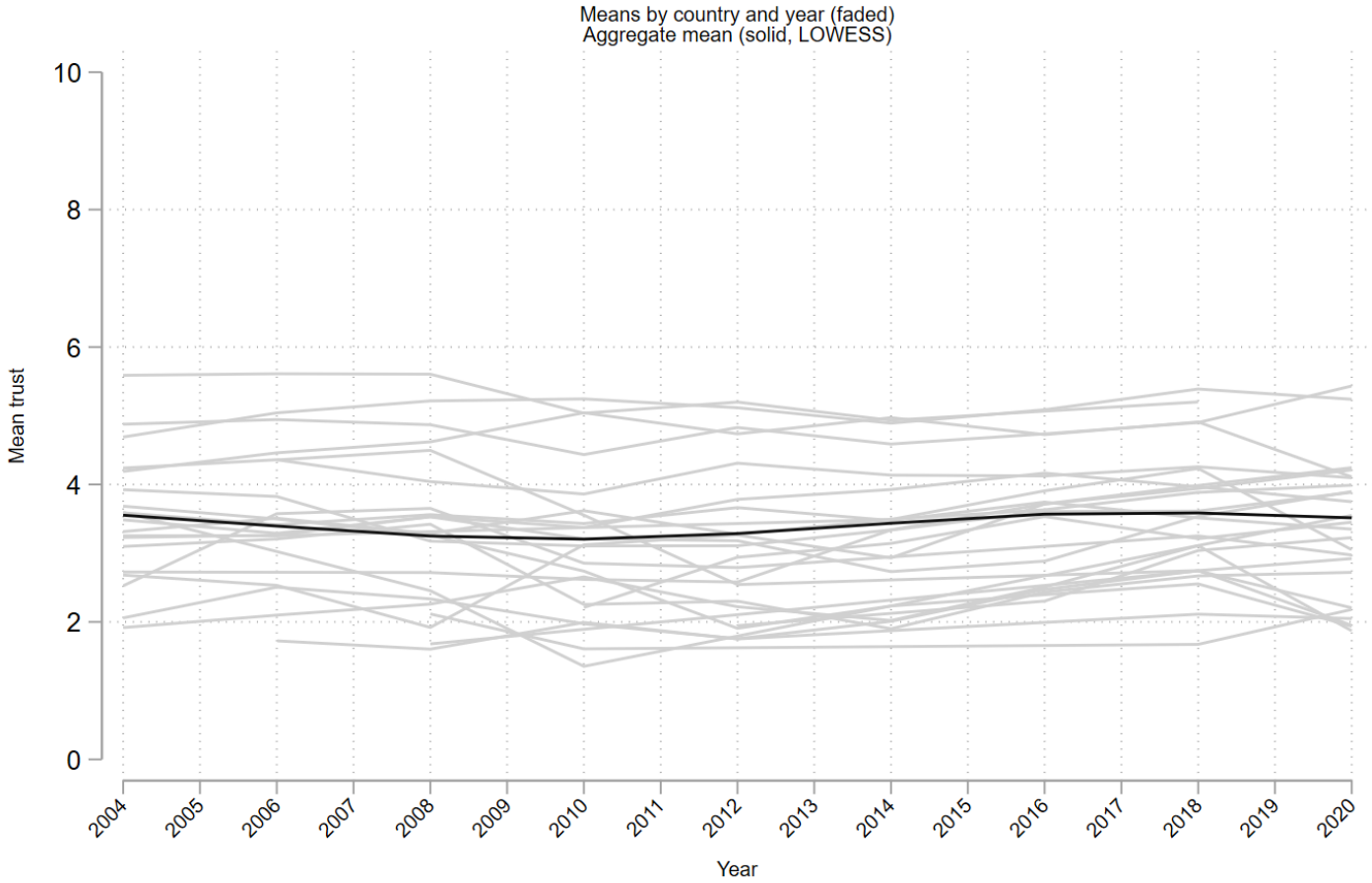
The last two items refer to political actors. The first one captures trust in politicians, with Figure 30 showing markedly lower levels of trust compared to those of each of the three previous government branches, particularly lower than trust in the legal system. Unlike in the case of trust in the national parliament, in the government and in the legal system, not a single country has a level of trust in politicians close to 8 points on the scale. In fact, the highest value is not even reaching the 6-point mark, while in several countries the minimum values go below 2 points. The aggregate mean is also shaped slightly differently, with its lowest values around 2008 and 2010, and an earlier recovery that was followed by another negative trend. This is mostly consistent with the general patterns found in similar projects that use the ESS (Hewlett et al., 2023).[9]

Figure 31 makes it easier to assess each of the trends by country. Here the differences between regions are even less clear-cut, with Nordic countries showing similar levels of trust in politicians than Western European countries. For instance, in The Netherlands and Belgium the levels of trust are almost indistinguishable from those of Finland or Sweden. However, in Southern Europe and in Central and Eastern Europe the main trends are still similar to those found for the three branches of government: in Southern Europe with strong sharp declines in the first period (from 2004 to 2012) and in former Communist countries with lower and relatively stable values of trust for most countries, with the same exceptions of Estonia (higher levels of trust) and Hungary (increasing levels of trust).

Although the levels of trust in politicians are lower than for the previously analysed institutions, the trends in Figure 32 suggest that these levels have not been systematically decreasing. Only in three countries (Denmark, Cyprus, and Spain) the levels of trust in politicians have meaningfully declined in the selected period. Although in more than half of the countries, the trends appear to be stable, in some of them, this medium-term stability also presented a curvilinear shape that signals a decrease in the 2010s and a posterior recovery in political trust levels. There are also more countries where the levels of trust in politicians significantly increase rather than decrease. In some cases, this growth was moderate (Bulgaria, Estonia, and Germany), in others it was rather steep, particularly in Italy (a country for which we do not have data for the first years in the time series), but also in Lithuania, Czechia, and Hungary. These patterns at the country level do not substantially tell a different story from what some earlier studies showed (Hewlett et al., 2023), and the observable differences quite likely come from the alternative methodological approaches. Overall, these other studies - particularly in terms of their interpretation - show a more worrisome picture due to their decision to only showcase “high trust” in their assessment of citizen’s trust in politicians.

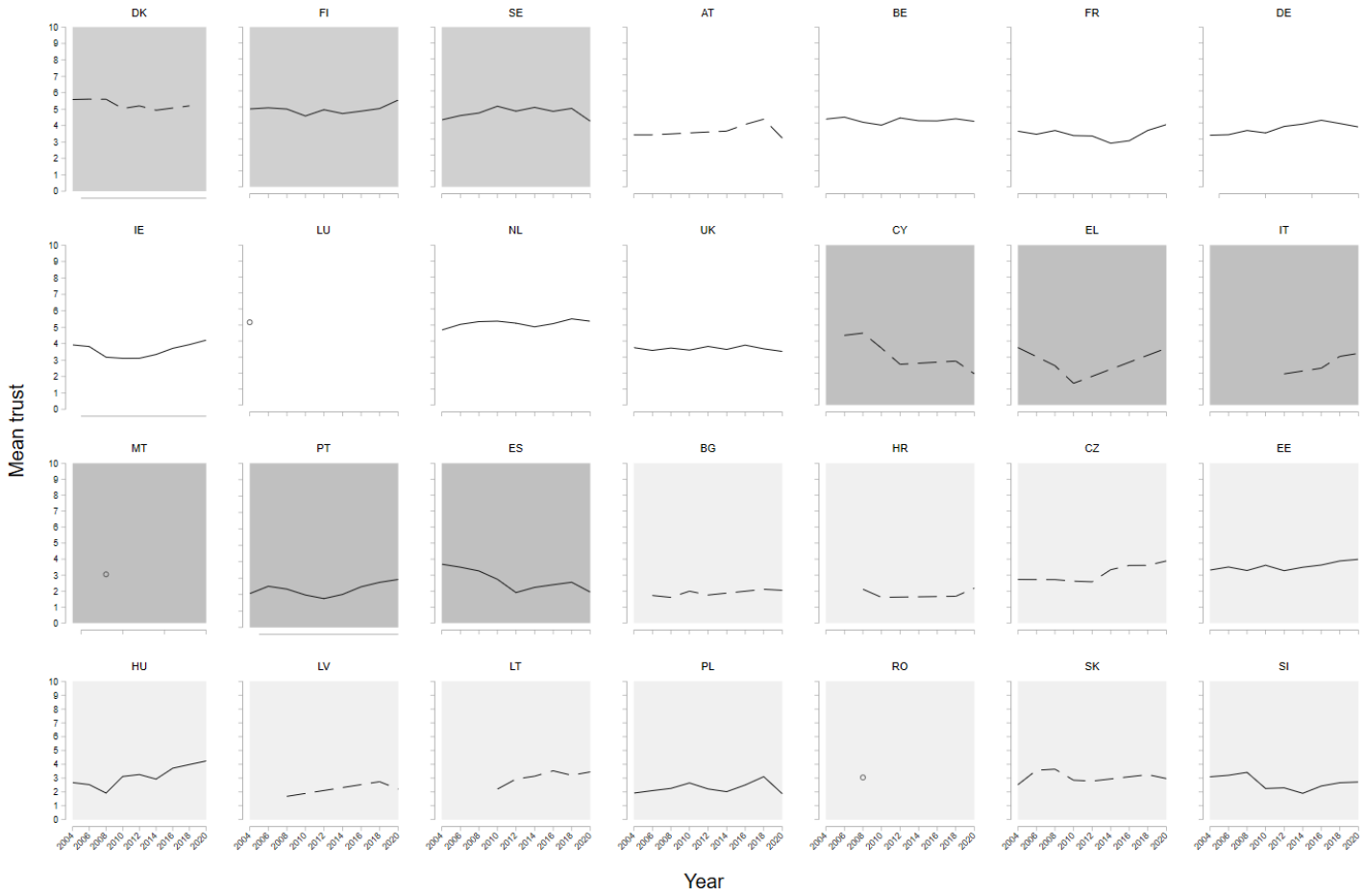
[9] Notice that these authors collapsed the values 7 to 10 into "high trust", which were then calculated as a percentage of all responses within each country and year. The authors did include the ESS waves 1, but did not include wave 10. Similarly, they included Switzerland and Norway, but only a selection of 15 EU Member States.

Figure 30. Trust in politicians, 2004–2020. (Carles Pamies and Laura Morales)



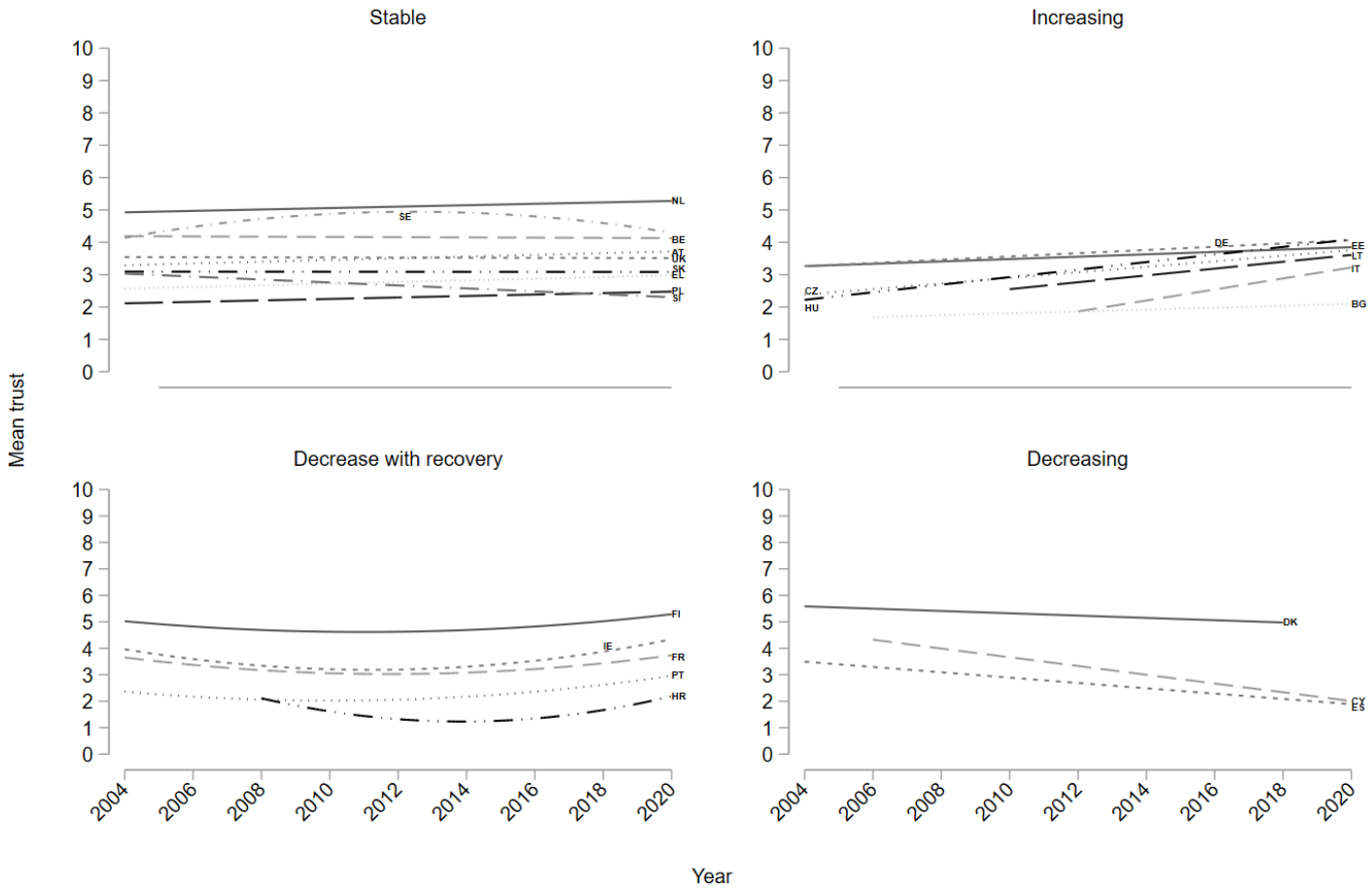
Note: missing cases include MT (no data), and the specific waves of DK 8 & 10, AT 4-6, LU 3-10, CY 2 & 7-8, EL 3 & 6-9, IT 2-5 & 7, BG 2 & 7-8, HR 2-3 & 6-8, CZ 3, LV 2-3 & 5-8, LT 2-4, RO 2-3 & 5-10, SK 7-8. The year refers to the first year of the ESS round.
Source: European Social Survey

Figure 31. Mean trust in politicians by country and year, 2004–2021. (Carles Pamies and Laura Morales)



Note: Countries displayed within the following regions (grouped by shade tone): Nordic, Western Europe, Southern Europe, Former Communist Countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Missing cases include MT (no data), and the specific waves of DK 8 & 10, AT 4-6, LU 3-10, CY 2 & 7-8, EL 3 & 6-9, IT 2-5 & 7, BG 2 & 7-8, HR 2-3 & 6-8, CZ 3, LV 2-3 & 5-8, LT 2-4, RO 2-3 & 5-10, SK 7-8. The year refers to the first year of the ESS round.
Source: European Social Surve

Figure 32. Trends of trust in the politicians by country and year, 2004–2020. (Carles Pamies and Laura Morales)



Note: missing cases include MT (no data), and the specific waves of DK 8 & 10, AT 4-6, LU 3-10, CY 2 & 7-8, EL 3 & 6-9, IT 2-5 & 7, BG 2 & 7-8, HR 2-3 & 6-8, CZ 3, LV 2-3 & 5-8, LT 2-4, RO 2-3 & 5-10, SK 7-8. The year refers to the first year of the ESS round.
Source: European Social Survey

6.6 Trust in Political Parties

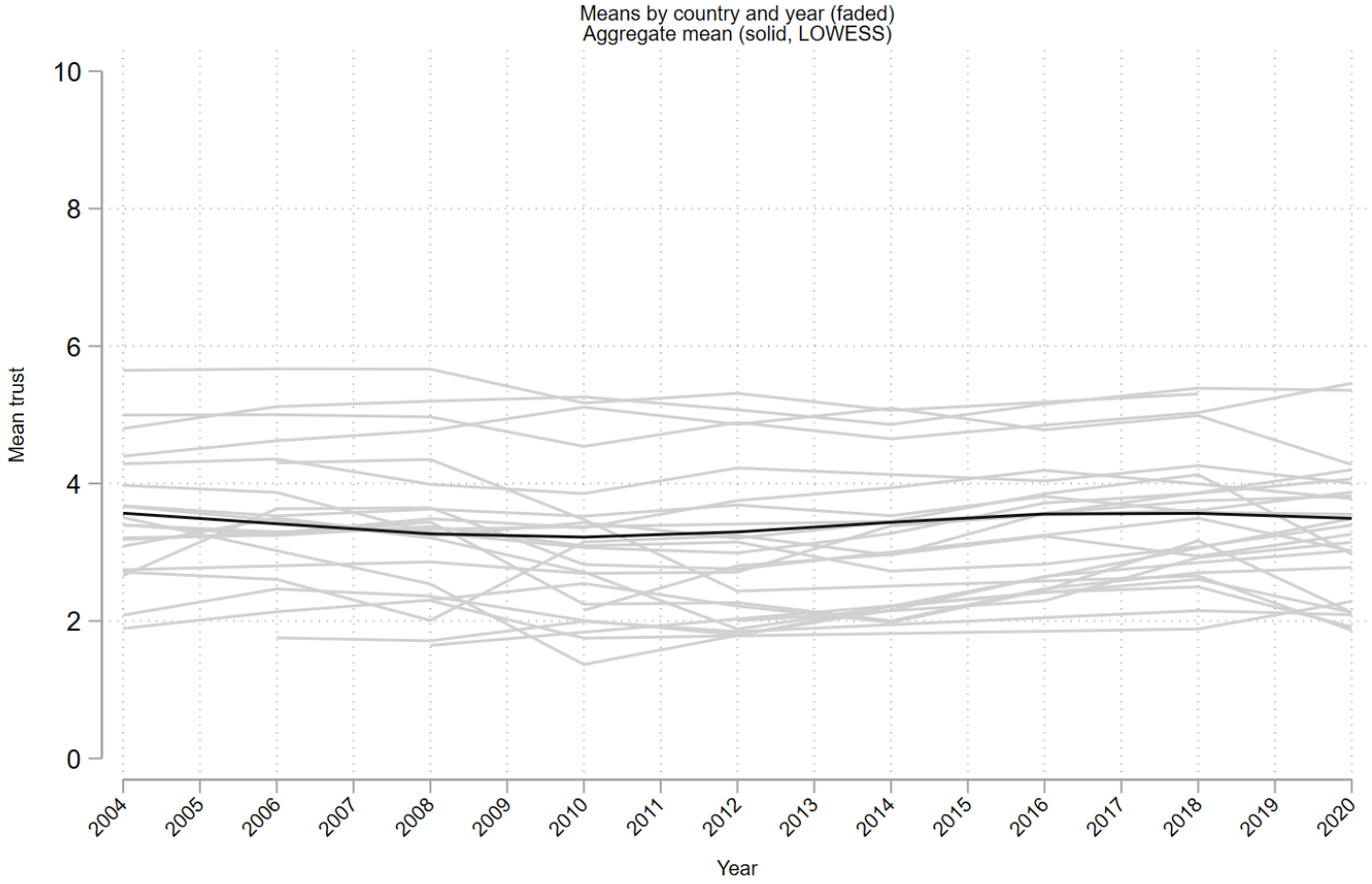
The last item analysed focuses on the levels of trust in political parties and it will be assessed mostly compared to trust in politicians. The comparisons will also be done with trust in the executive, the legislative and the judicial branches, not only for the sake of comparing but primarily because – except for trust in the legal system – all other institutions are inextricably linked to political parties.

Figure 33 shows the means of trust in political parties by country and year. The differences between the mean values in this graph and in the graph capturing trust in politicians are virtually imperceptible. Again, the levels of trust are substantially lower compared to trust in the national parliament, the national government and particularly the legal system. The aggregate mean represented by the black trend line also presents a similar shape to the one of trust in politicians: it declines until 2010, and it then bounces back slightly until 2018, when it starts decreasing again. Other studies, such as the one presented for the previous item on politicians (Hewlett et al., 2023), also found equivalent similarities between trust in political parties and trust in politicians.

Figure 34 is another example of the noticeable similarities between the levels of trust in political parties and in politicians, which could mean that respondents were not making a distinction between these two different actors. The existing differences cannot be discerned using this graph (only by looking at the actual values for each of the data points). Therefore, this figure suggests again that the Nordic countries are closer to Western European countries in terms of their trust in politicians, as compared to other items (legislative branch, executive branch, and legal system) in which respondents from these countries displayed higher levels of trust. Finally, the levels of trust in political parties for respondents in Southern and Central and European countries present similar patterns of trust to those found for other items.

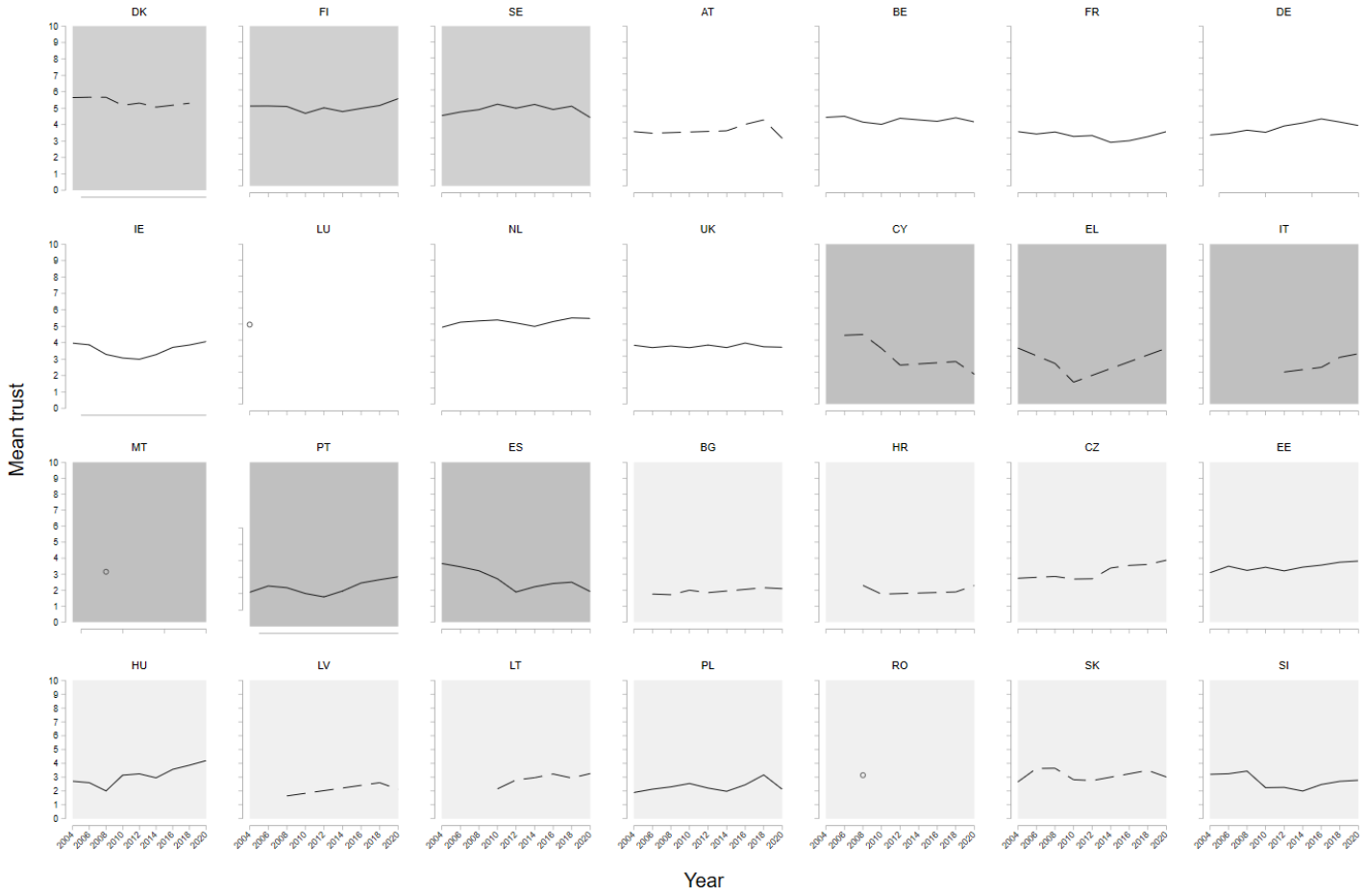
The last Figure 35 allows the visualisation of some of the minor differences that can be spotted between the two items of trust in political actors. The general trends are, again, very similar, but the intensity and even the trend vary a bit for some countries. Two countries change their trends of trust as compared to trust in politicians. The trend for trust in political parties in France is linearly stable, whereas for politicians it is curvilinearly stable (decrease with a recovery). In Portugal, trust in politicians has increased more clearly over time, while trust in political parties showed only a recovery, but not an improvement over the initial values of trust. This suggests that, in France, trust in political parties was not eroded, as in the case of trust in politicians, while in Portugal trust in political parties appears to have improved more when compared to trust in politicians.

Figure 33. Trust in political parties, 2004–2020. (Carles Pamies and Laura Morales)



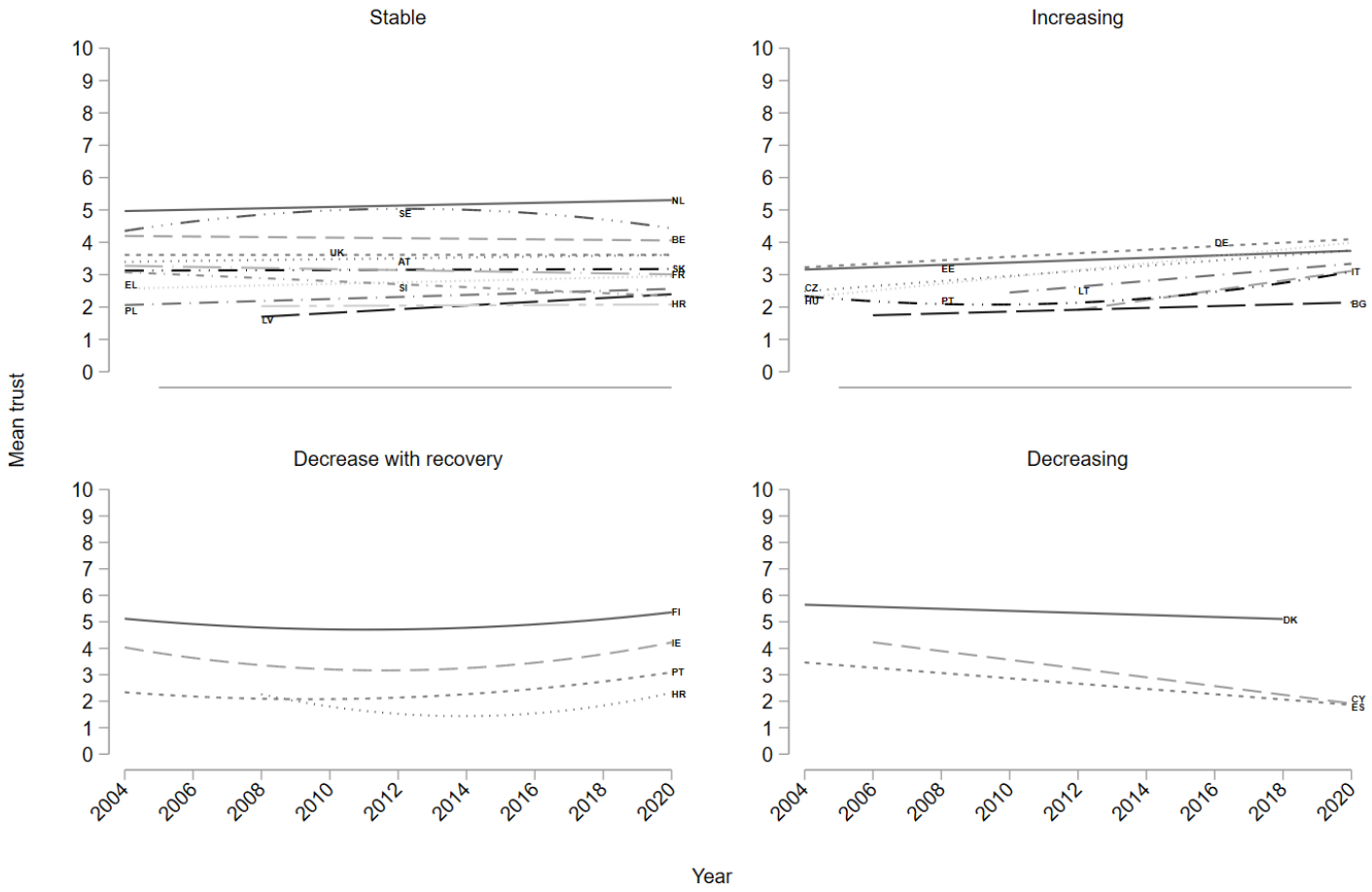
Note: missing cases: MT (no data), plus specific waves -> DK 8 & 10, AT 4-6, LU 3-10, CY 2 & 7-8, EL 3 & 6-9, IT 2-5 & 7, BG 2 & 7-8, HR 2-3 & 6-8, CZ 3, LV 2-3 & 5-8, LT 2-4, RO 2-3 & 5-10, SK 7-8. Source: European Social Survey

Figure 34. Mean trust in political parties by country and year, 2004–2021. (Carles Pamies and Laura Morales)



Note: Countries displayed within the following regions (grouped by shade tone): Nordic, Western Europe, Southern Europe, Former Communist Countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Missing cases: MT (no data), plus specific waves -> DK 8 & 10, AT 4-6, LU 3-10, CY 2 & 7-8, EL 3 & 6-9, IT 2-5 & 7, BG 2 & 7-8, HR 2-3 & 6-8, CZ 3, LV 2-3 & 5-8, LT 2-4, RO 2-3 & 5-10, SK 7-8
Source: European Social Survey

Figure 35. Trends of trust in political parties by country and year, 2004–2020. (Carles Pamies and Laura Morales)



Note: missing cases: MT (no data), plus specific waves -> DK 8 & 10, AT 4-6, LU 3-10, CY 2 & 7-8, EL 3 & 6-9, IT 2-5 & 7, BG 2 & 7-8, HR 2-3 & 6-8, CZ 3, LV 2-3 & 5-8, LT 2-4, RO 2-3 & 5-10, SK 7-8
Source: European Social Survey

6.7 Concluding Comments Regarding Trust in National Political Institutions and Actors

These detailed analyses of trust in national political institutions and actors suggest several conclusions that are worth highlighting. First, trust in national political institutions and actors seems somewhat more stable and less consistently in decline for many EU countries. Second, in some cases, we find slightly different trend patterns across institutions/actors within countries - and for the average for all EU countries. Third, we find a wide range of trend patterns: in some countries, political trust in national institutions/actors is gradually improving or essentially stable (e.g., Hungary, Germany, The Netherlands, or Poland), in other countries political trust in national institutions/actors is primarily decreasing (e.g., Cyprus, Denmark, and Spain), while in the rest we see patterns that somewhat vary depending on the institutions/actors. Fourth, we find that regional or geographic 'clusters' seem to matter mostly in shaping levels of political trust but less so in shaping trend patterns. Finally, we find similarities but also interesting differences between our findings and earlier studies. Our data on trust in the national parliaments and governments gives further nuance to the findings in Norris' analyses of the 1997–2009 Eurobarometers (Norris, 2011). We show how several countries have evolved differently in only one decade, while also ascertaining that the levels of trust in these two institutions are not quite the same (Schnaudt, 2019; Schneider, 2017). The differences are clearer cut in the case of trust in the legal system (see Bühlmann and Kunz, 2011). Regarding the levels of trust in politicians and political parties, even if there are similarities with the results found in previous studies (Hewlett et al., 2023), there are also differences (e.g. lower levels of trust in these earlier studies due to their sole focus on "high levels of trust") that are probably attributable to the different approaches to operationalising the data.

Overall, however, the core conclusion of this chapter is that the findings do not support a blanket statement that trust in national political institutions or actors is collapsing across the board. There are, clearly, reasons for concern in several countries and the patterns are not conducive to complacency, but the analyses do not support a uniform approach to addressing the crisis of political trust in Europe as it manifests slightly differently across EU countries and institutions. More nuanced approaches will be required.

7. Conclusions and policy recommendations

Henrik Serup Christensen and Janette Huttunen

7.1 Introduction

In this report, we have examined the general dynamics of trust based on secondary data analysis. By mapping the dynamics of trust in representative institutions and actors across Europe, we have observed how trust in representative institutions has changed over time and across countries, also considering differences between actors and institutions, most specifically whether they belong to the European or the national level. Our research aims have been 1) *to examine whether the developments differ across countries*, 2) *whether there are clusters of countries with similar developments*, and 3) *whether the developments differ between the European and national levels of governance*.

While our aims were mainly descriptive, the conceptual chapter in this report highlight several ongoing debates in the study of political trust that remain unsettled despite a plethora of research on the topic. We here highlight our findings for our three research questions and how these contribute to these debates.

First, one of the most important ones concerns the developments in political trust in representative democracies. Our results suggest that this discussion often fails to appreciate the considerable variation that exists in the patterns of developments in political trust. While we find relatively few instances of countries where trust has declined, we also find relatively few cases of trendless fluctuations in trust. Instead, we see a more nuanced picture of developments, where we see certain trends in developments, but these are not necessarily negative. Furthermore, even when negative developments do occur, such as is the case for several countries in the wake of the financial turmoil following 2008, we see that levels of political trust are relatively quick to recover in many countries, even when they have not (yet) reached prior levels of trust. This finding is important since it shows that negative trends in political trust caused by external shocks is often reversed following some years. In this sense, our findings align with those of Devine and Valgarðsson (2023) who at the individual level find political trust to be stable in the long term, with short-term volatility in response to changing political contexts. Our results suggest that this stability is also present at the macrolevel. Even if major events can lead to some volatility, there is a tendency for levels of trust to fully or partly recover in many of the countries included here.

Second, we observe differences across countries, meaning there seem to be clusters of countries with similar developments. While we do not here aim to disentangle these differences, a simple categorisation by geography reveals important clusters of countries with similar developments. For example, it is noteworthy that the Nordic countries, here represented by Denmark, Finland, and Sweden, all have relatively high levels of political trust across the board, and with few exceptions seem to maintain these high levels of trust. Another cluster of countries are made up by Southern European countries, who all experienced a pronounced drop in political trust following the post-2008 financial crisis and ensuing debt crisis. Most of these countries were severely affected by the economic turmoil so this is perhaps unsurprising. Nevertheless, these patterns suggest that the impact of major events may differ depending on cultural and historical legacies, as well as the direct impact of contextual events.

Finally, the inconclusiveness of this debate may to some extent be because of a singular focus on political trust in actors and institutions at the national level. Explicitly or implicitly, it has often been presumed that political trust is a one-dimensional attitude that cuts across levels of governance. Our results suggest that this belief may be misguided. Based on analyses of the available items on trust in institutions and actors at both the European and the national levels of government, the most credible interpretations suggests that these form two separate dimensions of political trust. In other words, even if there are some degree of correlation between the two, high trust in national-level actors does not necessarily imply high trust in European-level actors, and vice versa. This interpretation is also supported by our analyses of developments in trust in various actors at both the national and the European levels. Here we see that the patterns differ, at times quite markedly, between the two levels, whereas developments for specific actors at the two levels are often very similar. The patterns of developments are also distinct. Whereas trust in actors at the European level seem to be more affected by major events such as the financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic, trust at the national level fluctuates more and there is greater variation across countries. While this is perhaps hardly surprising, it is nonetheless evidence that it is important to specify the level of political trust as they do not necessarily go together.

All in all, our main conclusion is that the question of developments in political trust is more complex than what previous literature has presumed. Even if these developments do not necessarily amount to trendless fluctuations, it is necessary to appreciate both the important differences that exist among countries and levels of governance.

7.2 Shortcomings

By highlighting the considerable differences in trajectories across countries and levels of governance, this report shed some light on the developments in political trust. Nevertheless, our work was hampered by a lack of adequate data. Although several survey programs exist, and some efforts at data harmonization have been carried out, it proved difficult to find suitable data with adequate items covering trust in political actors and institutions across different levels of governance and covering a sufficient time span. Only the Eurobarometer included items covering several institutions and actors at the European level. The situation was even more dire for items covering trust in actors and institutions at the regional and local levels of government. Since these levels play an important role in the everyday lives of citizens across Europe, this may be of extreme importance for understanding developments in political trust at different levels of governance. This lack of suitable and reliable indicators on regional and local levels of government entails that we have limited knowledge on how citizens feel about these central actors in the European system of governance. While we laud the efforts of researchers doing the hard work of data harmonisation, it is difficult for single researchers and even research groups to find the resources to carry out these endeavours. Consequently, the existing sources of data all come with important deficiencies when it comes to examining developments in political trust across countries and levels of governance.

It should be noted that recent conceptual and empirical contributions have called into question whether the standard measures of political trust adequately captures the relevant dimensions of political trust, and in particular the distinction between mistrust and distrust (Bertsou, 2019; Bunting et al., 2021; Jennings et al., 2021; van der Meer and Zmerli, 2017). The standard measures of political trust may be incapable of distinguishing a healthy dose of mistrust from an unhelpful distrust that weakens political legitimacy. In this sense, it may be helpful to reconsider entirely how to define and empirically capture this illusive concept.

7.3 Future research

Some findings warrant more examination since we were unable to address them in full in the context of this report. As mentioned, our results point to considerable variation in the trajectories of political trust. In fact, we find that some countries experienced positive developments in political trust during this period. While it goes well beyond our present aspirations to examine what explains these differences, this is an important task for future research. It is a particular conundrum to explain why some countries clearly deviate from the general pattern to show slow, but nonetheless persistent improvements in political trust during the period we examine. Here it is important to consider both effects from contemporary events, but also historical and cultural legacies that may well help shape developments.

In connection to this, it is also an important task to examine differences in how major events such as financial crises and the Covid-19 pandemic affected developments in trust. We observe considerable variation in how affected levels of political trust were by these major crises. A few countries even experienced positive developments during this period despite the considerable challenges. Furthermore, although our evidence is largely impressionistic, it seems like how affected individual countries were by these events can only go some way in explaining the differences that we observe. Scrutinising these differences in more detail may allow identifying measures that can help avoid adverse effects on levels of trust, and thereby also making societies more likely to overcome the challenges that these events present.

An important subsequent step in trying to understand the developments in political trust is to understand the differences in levels of political trust between groups in society. This will be the focus of the ActEU report on how trends in trust among specific social and political groups, including ethnic and territorial identities, territorial attachment and regime types at subnational level impact on varying levels of trust across European subnational units (D2.3).

7.4 Policy recommendations

Based on our findings, we recommend the following policy initiatives to support the study of political trust in the future:

- To provide funding for data infrastructures, such as GESIS or other CESSDA data archives, to perform high quality data harmonisation of survey data they are storing.
- To enable the inclusion of a broader range of trust items focusing on the local, regional, and European levels of governance in cross-national survey programs that are directly funded by the EU, such as the Eurobarometer, the European Quality of Life Survey, and the European Social Survey.
- ➢ *To achieve these first two policy recommendations, the European Commission (notably DG Research and Innovation and the European Research Executive Agency) should consider facilitating coordination and cooperation discussions across survey infrastructures to improve the coverage and innovation of the existing evidence base, as well as ear-marked funding for data post-harmonisation by social science research infrastructures within future Framework Programmes.*
- To facilitate the development of appropriate indicators of political trust that adequately reflect the complexity of the concept, particularly regarding the conceptual nuances around mistrust and distrust.
- Given the evidence suggesting important cross-national variations in the trends in political trust and the difference that citizens increasingly make between EU and national

institutions and actors, to design properly targeted and country-adapted strategies and interventions to improve political trust where it is needed.

- *To achieve these last two recommendations, innovative experimental interventions could be designed, for example in collaboration between the Joint Research Centre and DG IDEA, to assess pathways to success in improving citizens' political trust.*

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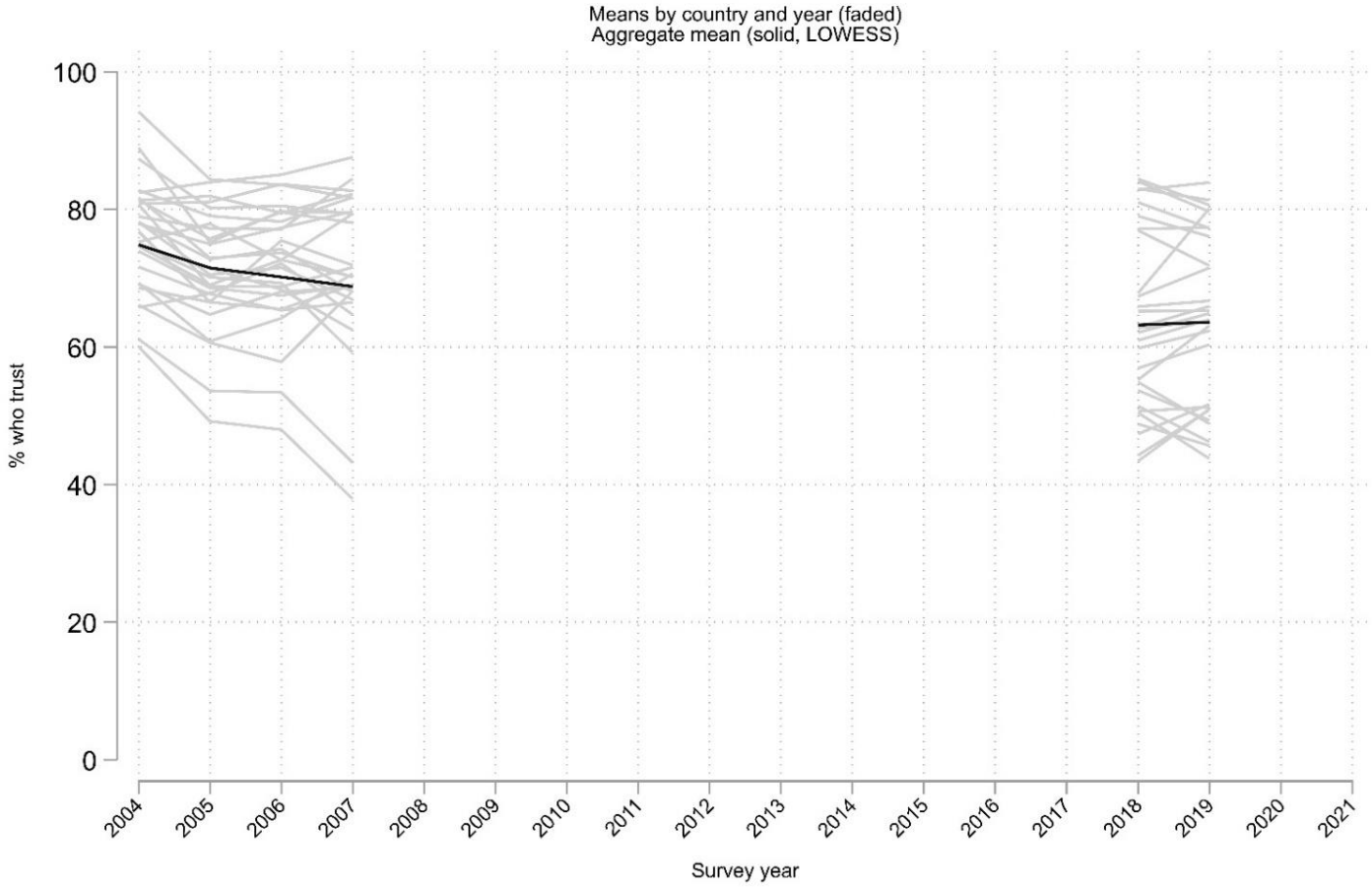
Appendices

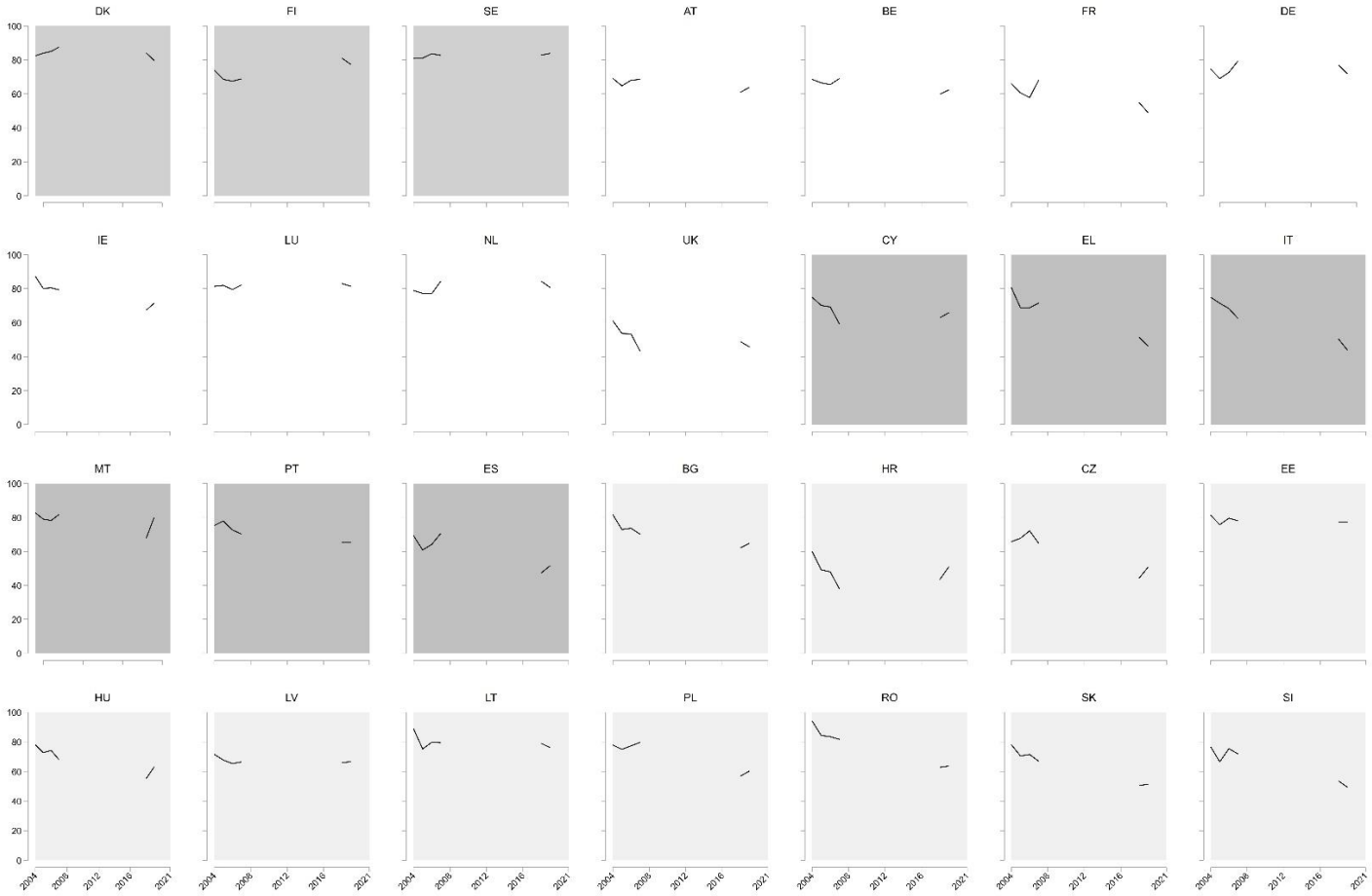
Appendix 1 for Ch. 5: Figures of other EU actors

Figure A1: Developments in trust in the European Court of Justice, 2004–2021



Source: Harmonized Eurobarometer (Russo & Bräutigam, 2023)

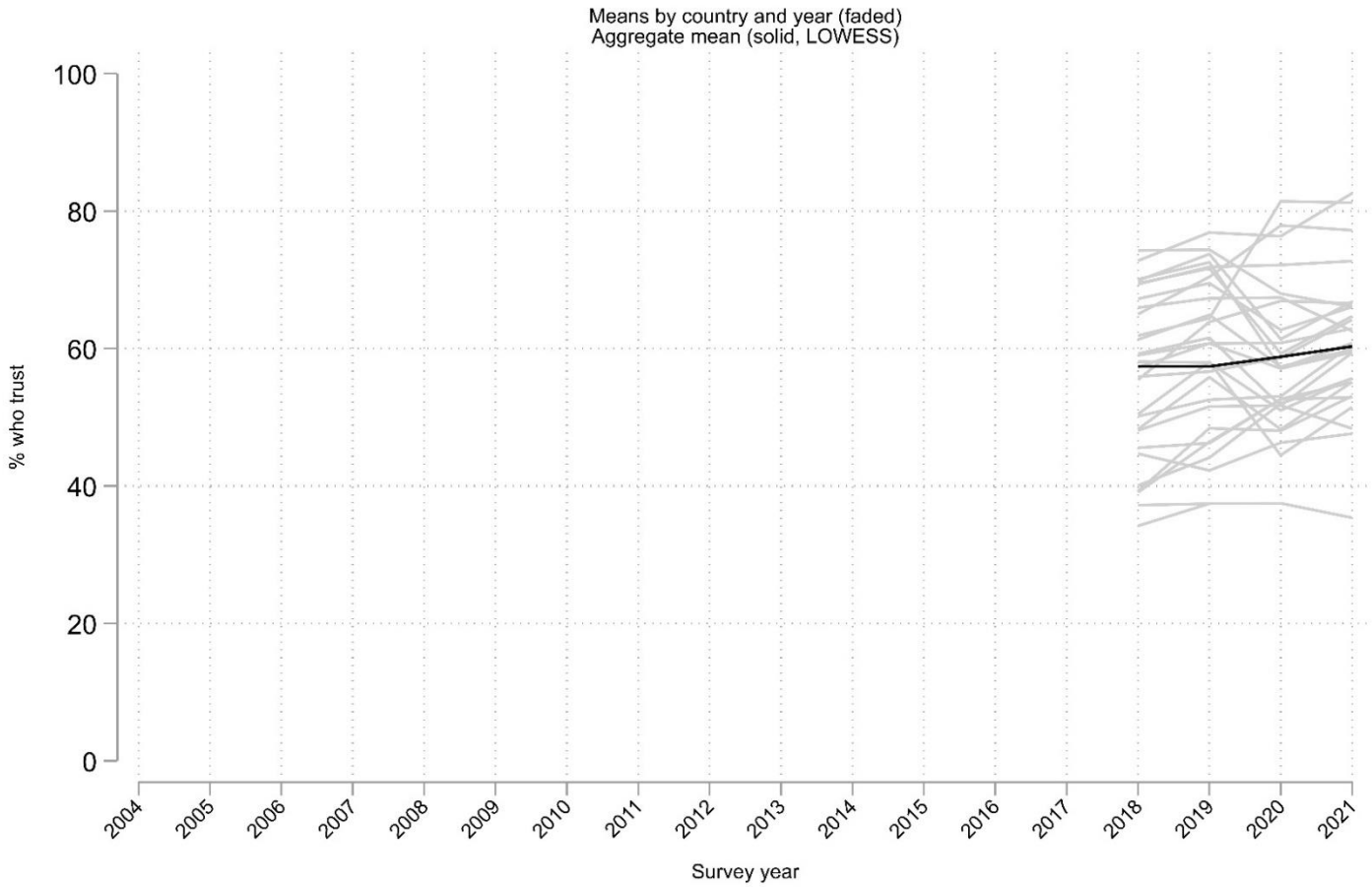
Figure A2: Mean trust in the European Court of Justice by country and year, 2004–2021



Note: Countries displayed within the following regions (grouped by shade tone): Nordic, Western Europe, Southern Europe, Former Communist Countries of Central and Eastern Europe

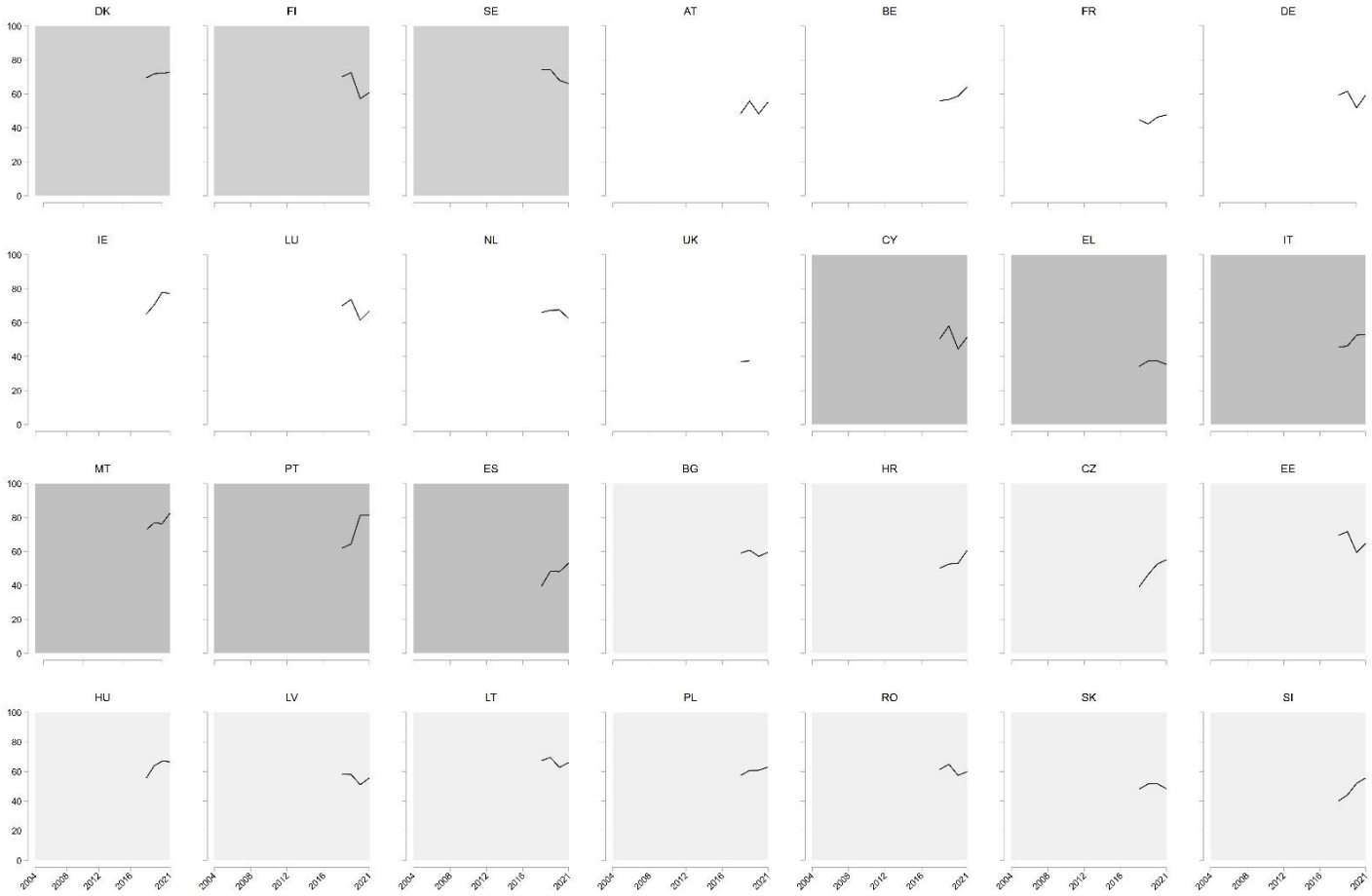
Source: Harmonized Eurobarometer (Russo & Bräutigam, 2023)

Figure A3: Developments in trust in the European Council, 2004–2021



Source: Harmonized Eurobarometer (Russo & Bräutigam, 2023)

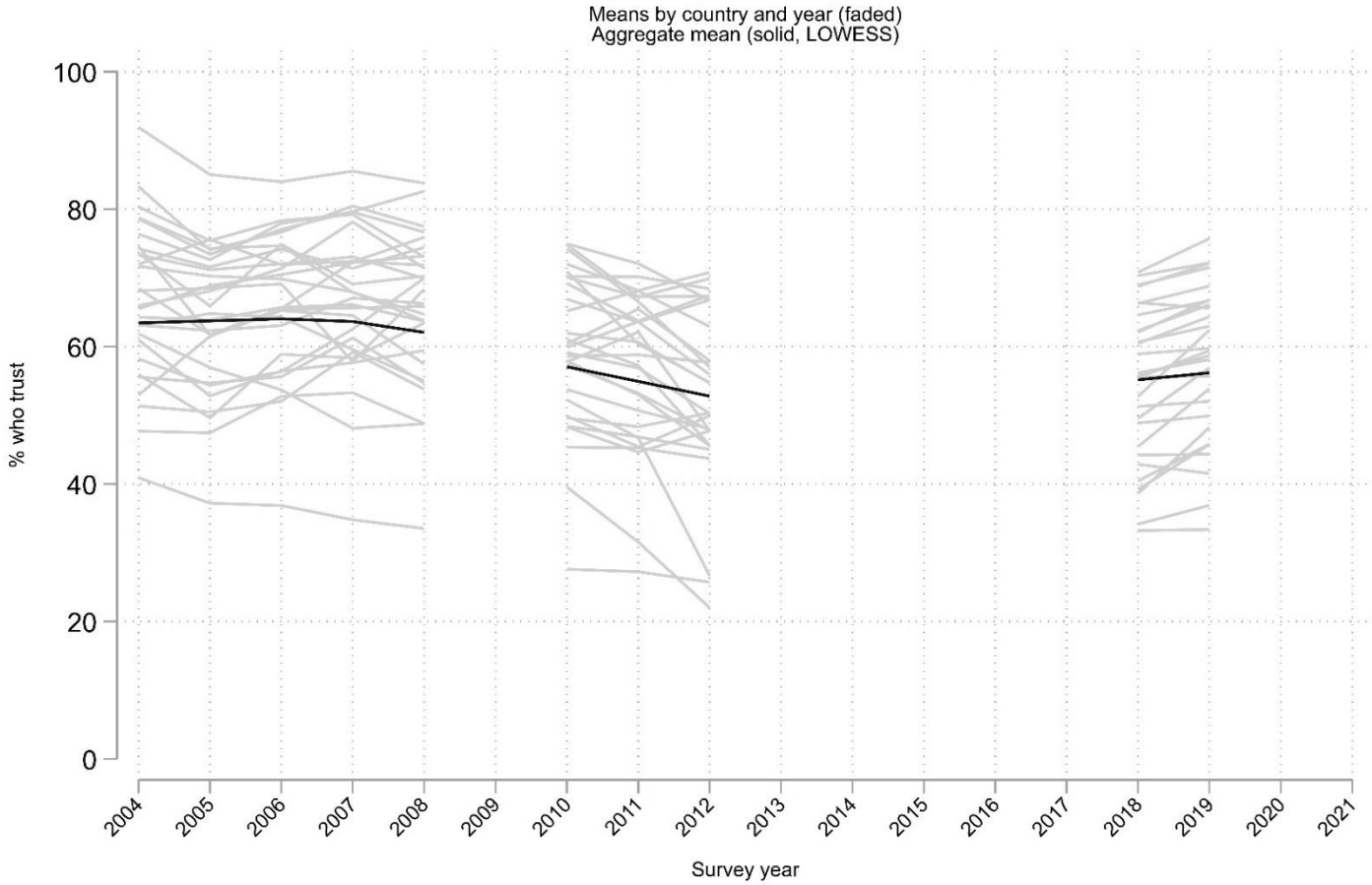
Figure A4: Mean trust in the European Council by country and year, 2004–2021.



Note: Countries displayed within the following regions (grouped by shade tone): Nordic, Western Europe, Southern Europe, Former Communist Countries of Central and Eastern Europe

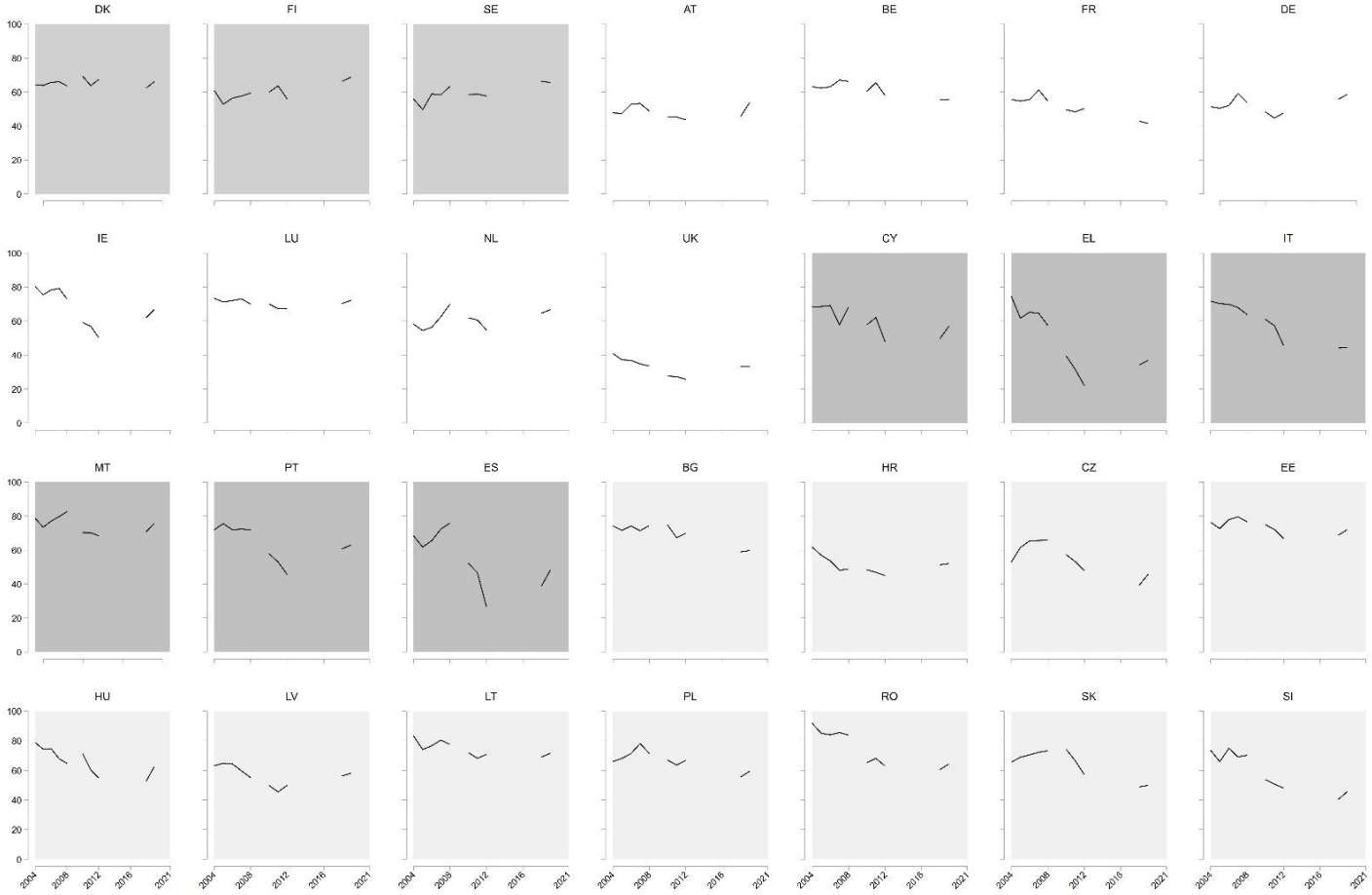
Source: Harmonized Eurobarometer (Russo & Bräutigam, 2023)

Figure A5: Developments in trust in the Council of EU, 2004–2021



Source: Harmonized Eurobarometer (Russo & Bräutigam, 2023)

Figure A6: Mean trust in the Council of EU by country and year, 2004–2021.

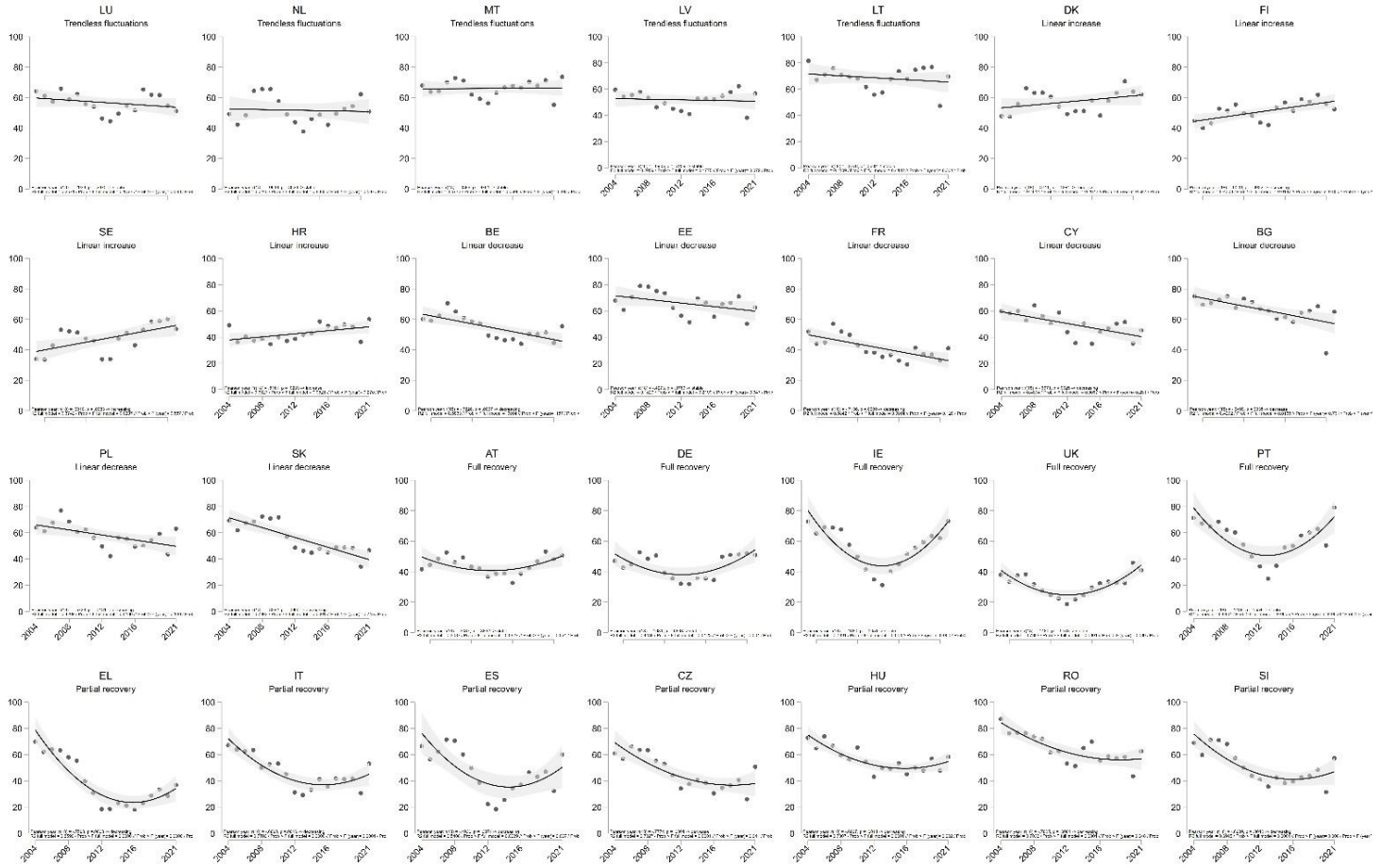


Note: Countries displayed within the following regions (grouped by shade tone): Nordic, Western Europe, Southern Europe, Former Communist Countries of Central and Eastern Europe

Source: Harmonized Eurobarometer (Russo & Bräutigam, 2023)

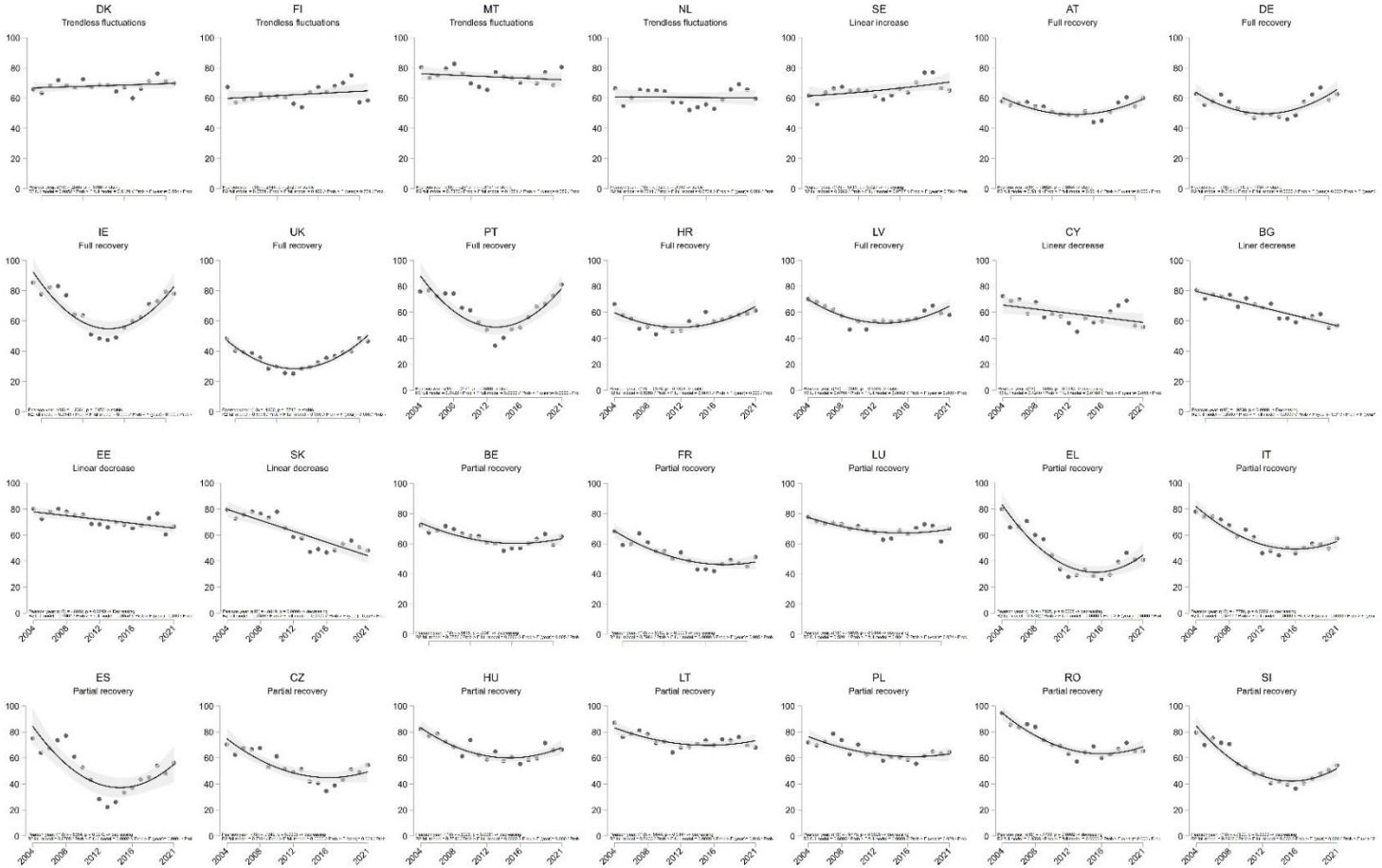
Appendix 2 for Ch 5: Intermediate figures for classifying countries.

Figure A7. Trends in trust in European Union (EU), 2004–2021



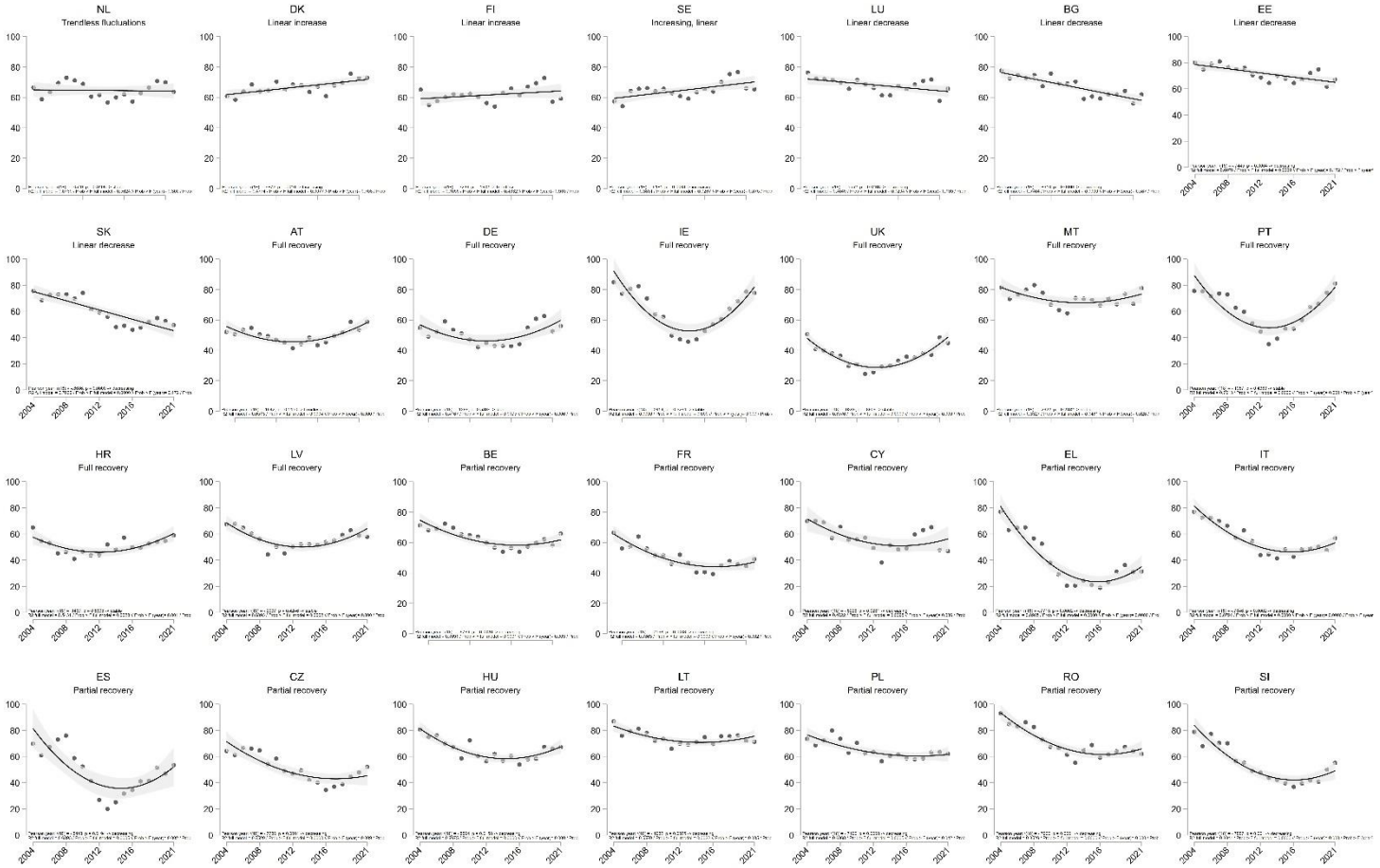
Source: Harmonized Eurobarometer (Russo & Bräutigam, 2023)

Figure A8. Trends in trust in European Parliament (EP), 2004–2021.



Source: Harmonized Eurobarometer (Russo & Bräutigam, 2023)

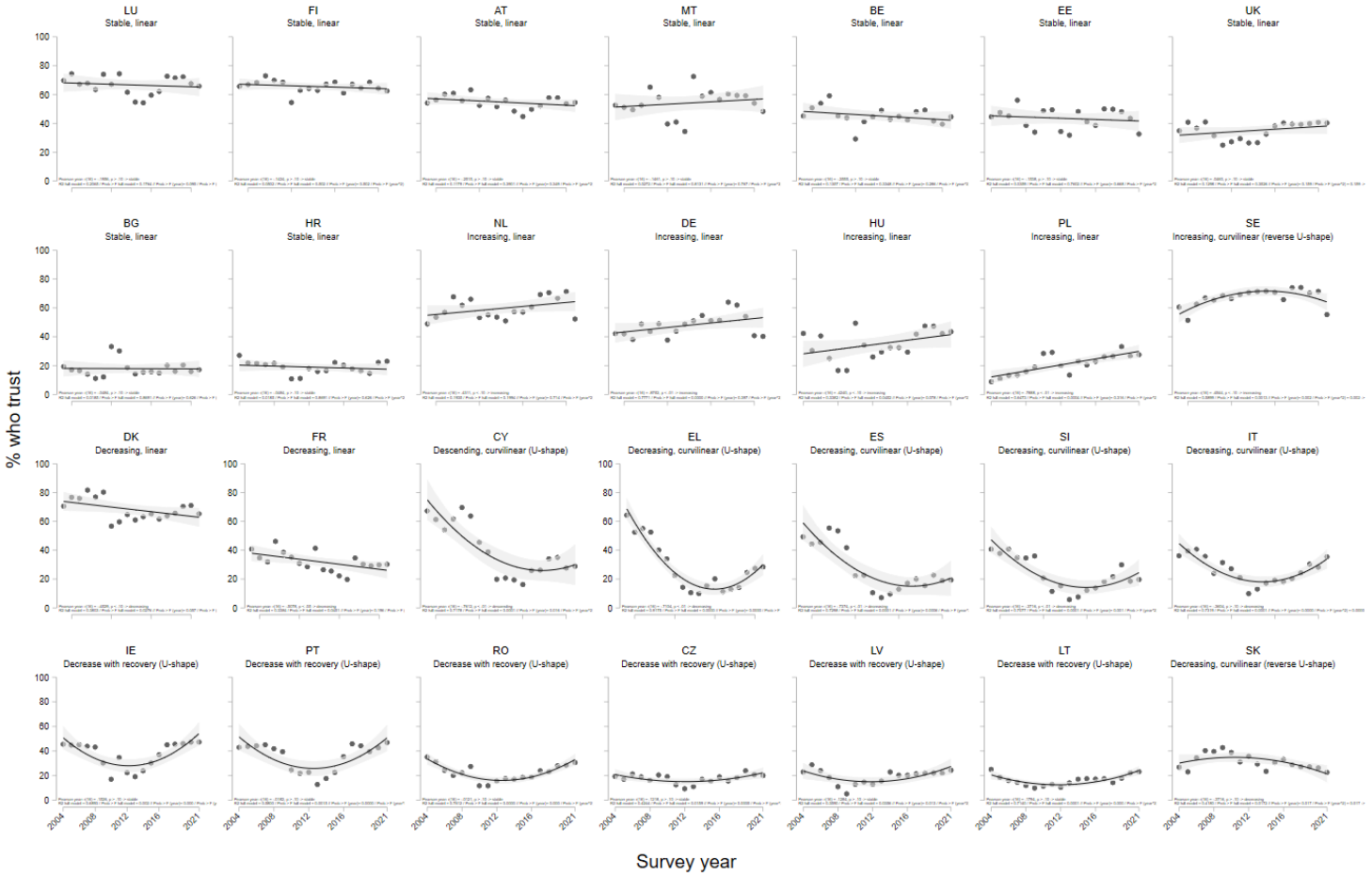
Figure A9. Trends in trust in the European Commission, 2004-2021.



Source: Harmonized Eurobarometer (Russo & Bräutigam, 2023)

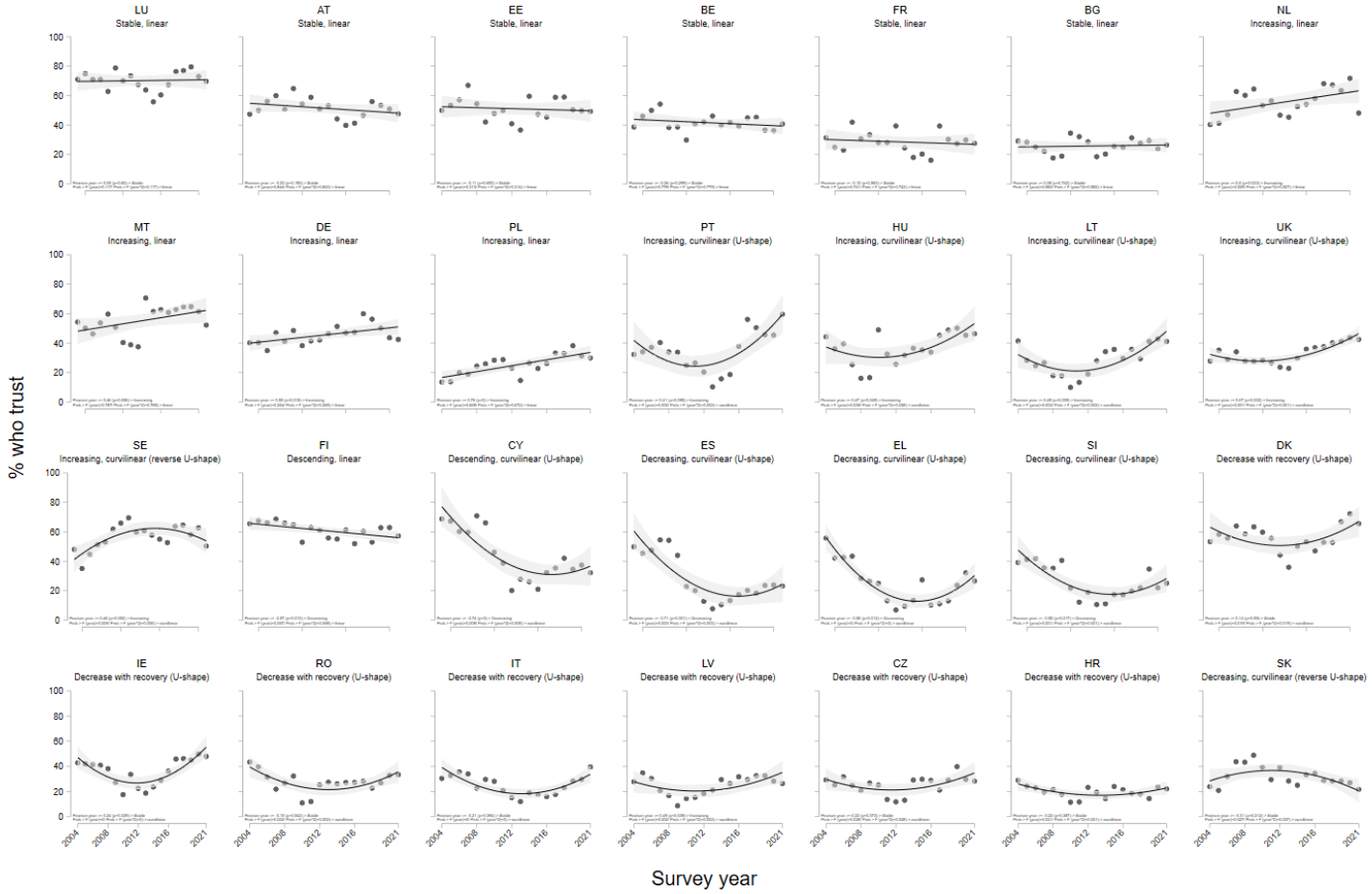
Appendix 3 for Ch. 6: Intermediate figures for classifying countries

Figure A10. Trends of trust in the national parliament by country and year (subplots by country 2004–2021)



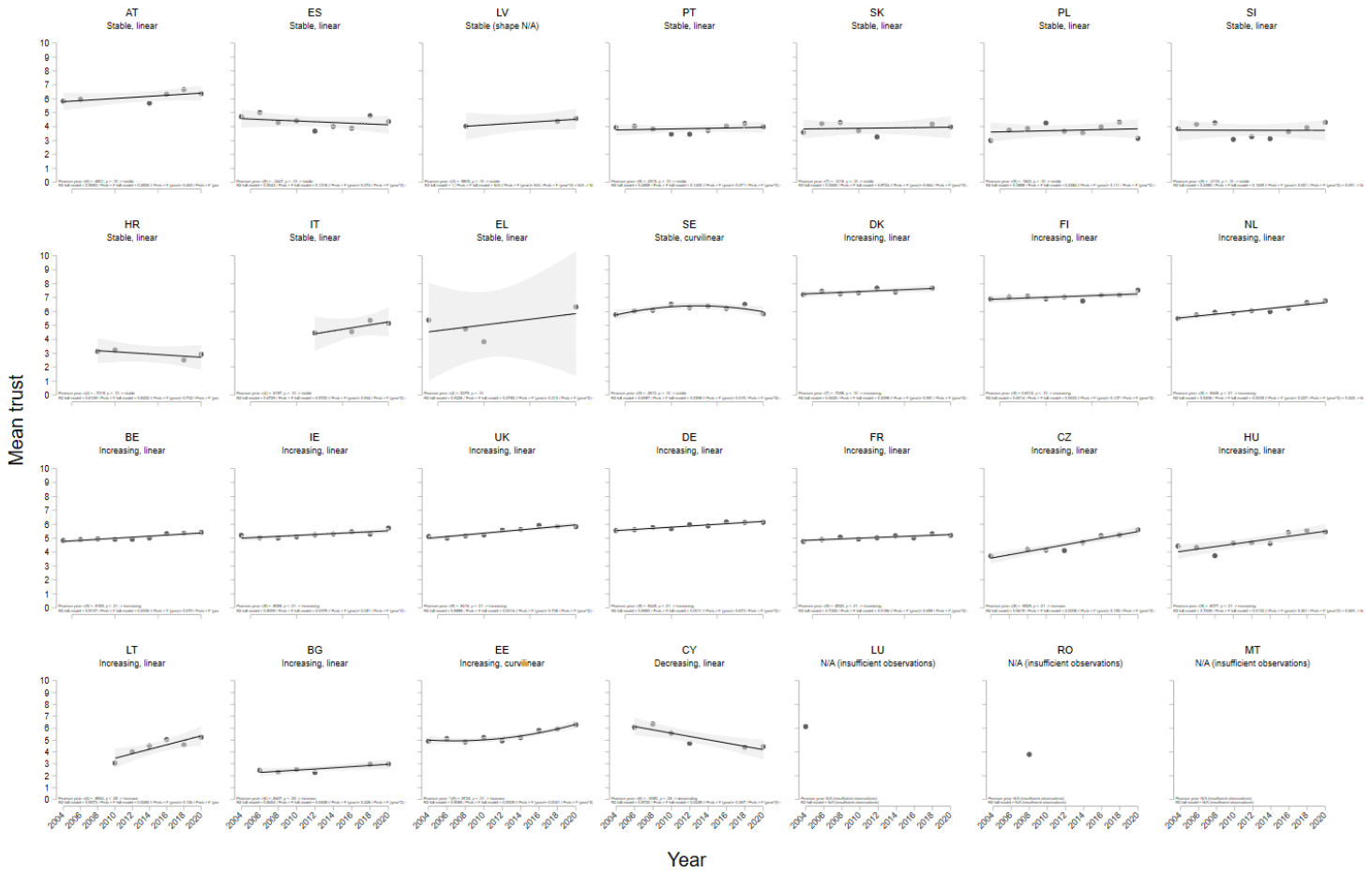
Source: Harmonized Eurobarometer (Russo & Bräutigam, 2023)

Figure A11. Trends of trust in the national government by country and year (subplots by country 2004–2020)



Source: Harmonized Eurobarometer (Russo & Bräutigam, 2023)

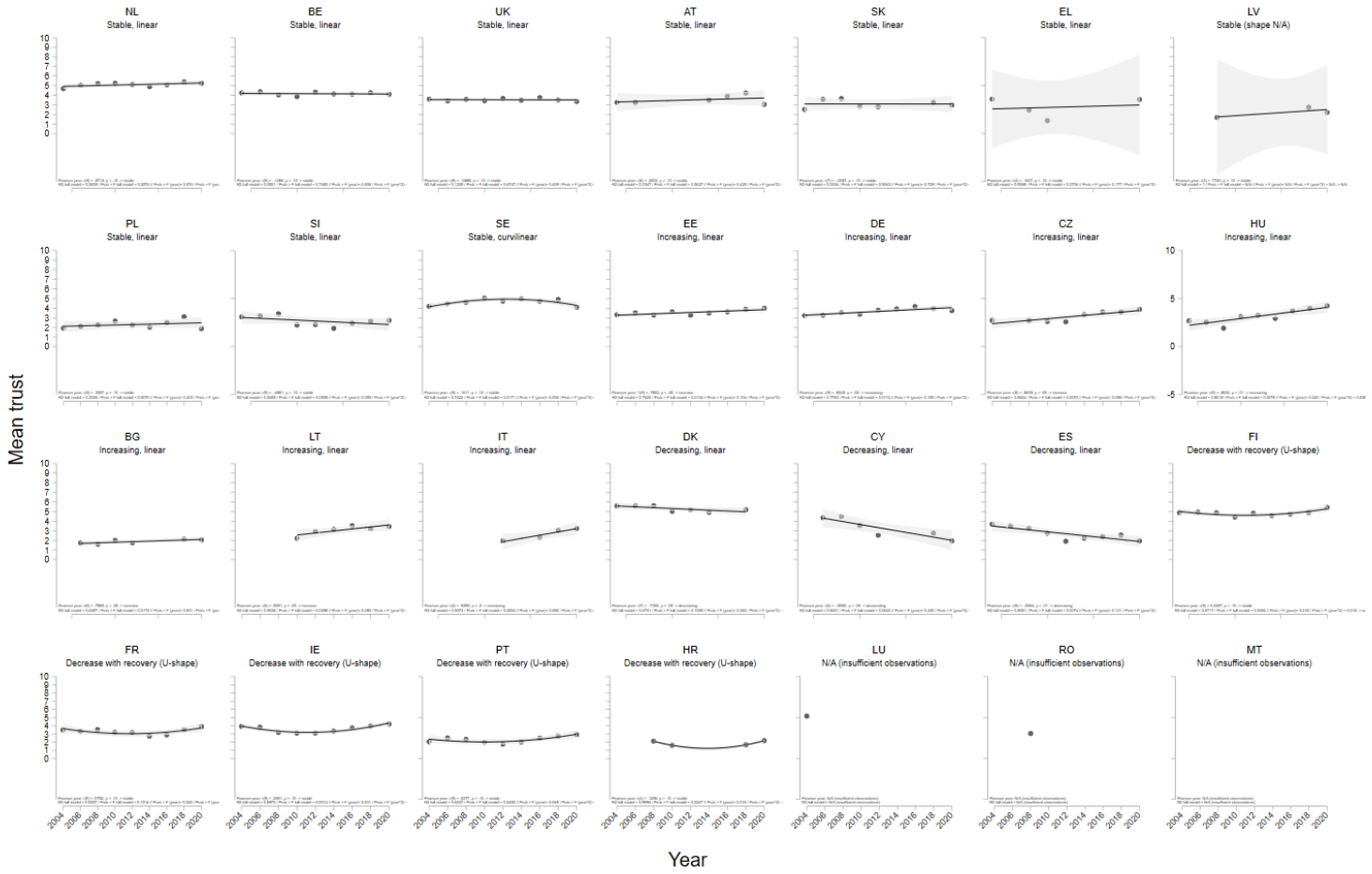
Figure A13. Trends of trust in the legal system by country and year (subplots by country 2004–2020)



Note: missing cases include MT (no data), and the specific waves of DK 8 & 10, AT 4-6, LU 3-10, CY 2 & 7-8, EL 3 & 6-9, IT 2-5 & 7, BG 2 & 7-8, HR 2-3 & 6-8, CZ 3, LV 2-3 & 5-8, LT 2-4, RO 2-3 & 5-10, SK 7-8. The year refers to the first year of the ESS round.

Source: ESS

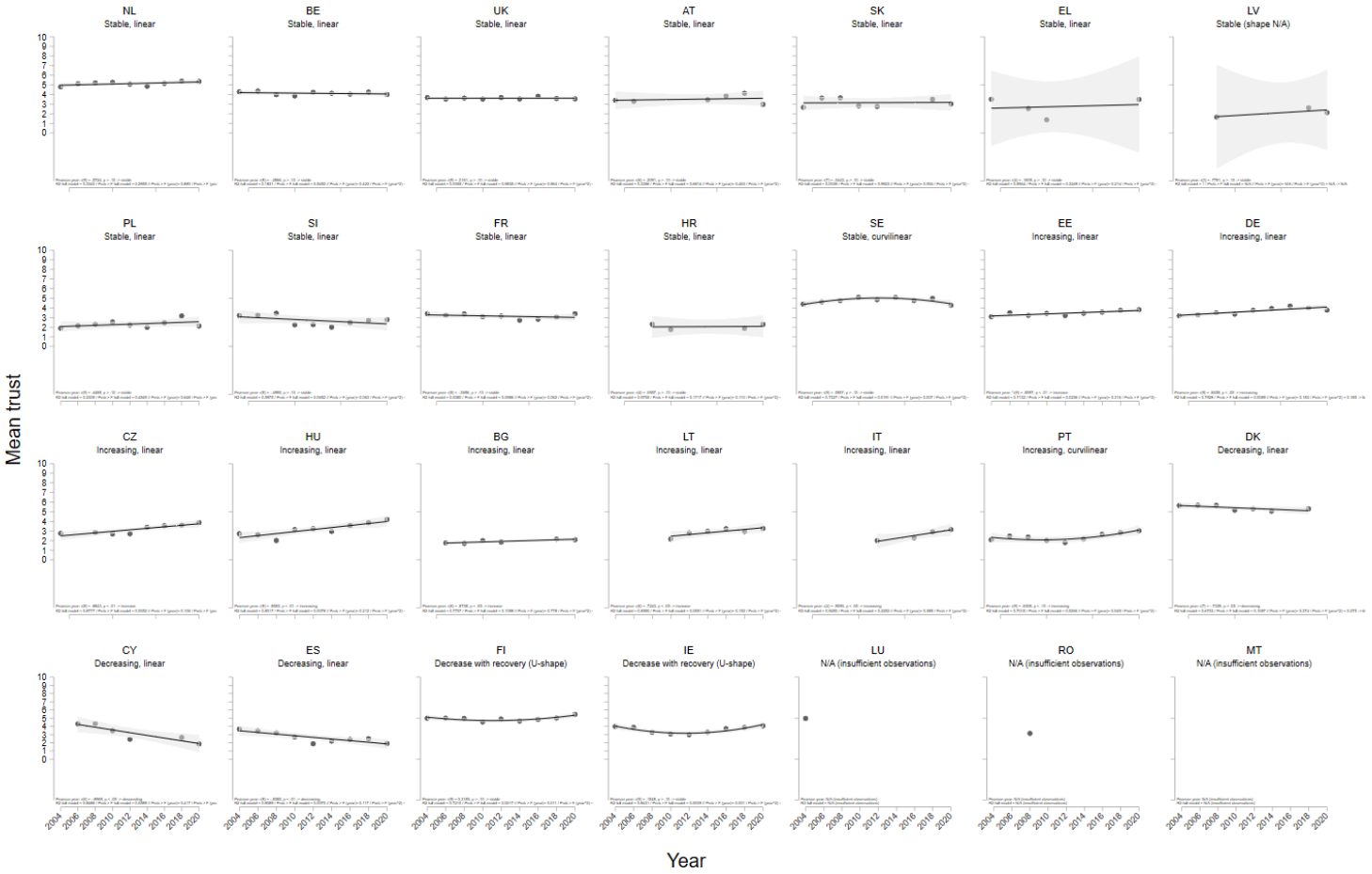
Figure A14. Trends of trust in politicians by country and year (subplots by country 2004–2020)



Note: missing cases include MT (no data), and the specific waves of DK 8 & 10, AT 4-6, LU 3-10, CY 2 & 7-8, EL 3 & 6-9, IT 2-5 & 7, BG 2 & 7-8, HR 2-3 & 6-8, CZ 3, LV 2-3 & 5-8, LT 2-4, RO 2-3 & 5-10, SK 7-8. The year refers to the first year of the ESS round.

Source: ESS

Figure A15. Trends of trust in political parties by country and year (subplots by country 2004–2020)



Note: missing cases: MT (no data), plus specific waves -> DK 8 & 10, AT 4-6, LU 3-10, CY 2 & 7-8, EL 3 & 6-9, IT 2-5 & 7, BG 2 & 7-8, HR 2-3 & 6-8, CZ 3, LV 2-3 & 5-8, LT 2-4, RO 2-3 & 5-10, SK 7-8
Source: ESS

About ActEU

How can we conceptualize and empirically measure political trust and legitimacy beyond the usual survey question "How much trust do you have in the parliament?"? Does the multi-level nature of European representative democracies require an identical level of citizen support at the regional, national and EU levels? How does social polarization on key policy issues of our times –immigration, climate change, and gender inequality– challenge the political trust in, and legitimacy of, democratic political systems? And what can policymakers and civil society do to master these challenges? ActEU aims at finding answers to these questions pursuing two overarching goals: In phase 1, we map and investigate persistent problems of declining trust, legitimacy and representation in Europe with a particular attention to the polarization of societies and the EU's multi-level structures. Providing an innovative conceptual framework on political attitudes, behaviour and representation across Europe, we establish an original empirical infrastructure based on an innovative combination of methods and newly collected quantitative and qualitative empirical data (focus groups, experimental surveys, web scraping). In phase 2, these results will flow directly into the creation of a toolbox of remedial actions to enhance political trust in and legitimacy of European representative democracies. In cooperation with a newly created Civil Society Network, Youth Democracy Labs across 13 European cities and in exchange with political cartoonists "Cartooning for democracy", we will develop context-sensitive solutions for all polity levels and some of the most polarizing policy areas, and craft tailor-made toolkits for both policymakers and civil society and the educational sector. Finally, we deploy a differentiated dissemination strategy to maximize ActEU's scientific, policy and societal impact in activating European citizens' trust and working towards a new era of representative democracy.

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