

RESEARCH ARTICLE

What explains trust in institutions? Multi-disciplinary evidence from an international survey

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Abstract

In many countries, trust in institutions has eroded, undermining civic engagement, social cohesion, and political stability. This study analyzes the determinants of trust in government, civil servants, the judicial system, and the police, drawing on representative samples from six OECD countries (Germany, Italy, Japan, Slovenia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) between 2017 and early 2020. It employs survey data, experimental methods, and psychometric techniques to measure various dimensions of trust. The findings indicate that self-reported trust in institutions hinges primarily on perceived governance quality, encompassing both competence (responsiveness, effectiveness, and reliability) and integrity (values and ethical conduct). Specifically, perceived government reliability in the event of a natural disaster and the integrity of high-level officials emerge as the strongest predictors of self-reported trust in government, followed by satisfaction with security and education services. Although partisan affiliation also exerts some influence, its effect is comparatively modest. Overall, these results suggest that trust in institutions is amenable to policy interventions that enhance governance performance, thereby fostering higher levels of public trust through repeated, positive interactions with well-functioning public services.

Keywords: trust; cooperative games; Implicit Association Test; behavioral study; psychology

Introduction

Trust in public institutions, a key ingredient of social and economic progress (Algan and Cahuc 2014), has eroded in many countries following major shocks like the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic (Algan, Guriev, Papaioannou et al. 2017; Cohen, P'eron and Algan 2022; OECD 2017a, 2017b). This decline poses significant challenges for collective action and the effectiveness of policy responses (Bargain and Aminjonov 2020). The consequences extend far beyond politics, as a robust literature links institutional trust to higher economic growth (Knack and Keefer 1997; Temple 2000), better health outcomes and behaviors (Brown, Scheffler, Seo et al. 2006; Lochner, Kawachi, Brennan et al. 2003), greater subjective well-being (Boarini, Comola, Smith et al.

Highlights

- We study determinants of institutional trust using a multidisciplinary survey with experimental modules in representative samples from six OECD countries.
- Both perceived governance quality and political affiliation shape institutional trust; governance quality explains more.
- Key predictors are perceived government competence (service satisfaction, responsiveness, and reliability) and values (integrity, openness, and fairness).
- The perceived integrity of high-level officials strongly predicts evaluations of public institutions.
- Improving governance quality can raise trust in government and other institutions.

2012; Helliwell and Wang 2011), and lower crime rates (Buonanno, Montolio and Vanin 2009). For these reasons, restoring and fostering trust constitutes a first-order policy priority.

A central challenge for policymakers, however, is whether trust can be rebuilt through deliberate action. Is institutional trust primarily an earned response to government performance, making it policy-actionable? Or is it a reflection of deeply ingrained cultural values and psychological traits, placing it largely beyond the reach of short-term policy interventions? This paper confronts this question by conducting a comprehensive, multidisciplinary ‘horse race’ between competing predictors of trust. This paper adopts a multidisciplinary approach to identify the most robust predictors of institutional trust drawing from various social science fields, such as political science (Citrin and Stoker 2018; Marien and Hooghe 2011; van der Meer and Ouattara 2019), economics and behavioral economics (Fehr 2009; La Porta, Lopez-de-Silanes, Shleifer et al. 1997), psychology (Stanley, Sokol-Hessner, Banaji et al. 2011), sociology (Reimann, Schilke and Cook 2017; Schilke, Reimann and Cook 2015), and neuroscience (Schilke, Reimann and Cook 2013). The question examined in this study is the following: what are the individual values, expectations, social preferences, societal attitudes, political perceptions, and perceptions of public governance that are most linked to trust in institutions? In particular, this study assesses the explanatory power of governance quality (ie perceived government probity, fairness, and competence) relative to other factors such as partisanship, individual preferences, and societal factors identified in behavioral economics and social psychology.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to systematically examine the key correlates of both self-reported and experimental measures of institutional trust, drawing on theories and constructs from multiple social science disciplines. Using representative samples of approximately 1000 respondents per country across six countries, it offers a cross-national perspective rarely found in the literature. The analysis is based on the Trustlab database – the first internationally comparable, nationally representative dataset that combines survey data with behavioral and experimental measures of trust and social preferences. The surveys were fielded in the United States (June–July 2017), Germany (July–August 2017, with an additional 97 respondents in June–July 2018), Italy and the United Kingdom (June–July 2018), Japan (January–February 2020), and Slovenia (March–April 2017). This rich dataset allows us to identify the most robust correlates of trust in government, the judicial system, civil servants, and the police. The paper proceeds as follows: Section Conceptual framework reviews the multidisciplinary literature that motivates our analysis. Section Data, methods, and research question describes the Trustlab survey design and our empirical methods. Section Results presents our findings, and Section Discussion discusses their implications.

Conceptual framework

Political trust has long been described as general support for the political system, separate from short-term approval of specific leaders or policies (Easton 1965). Since citizens allow the state to exercise power over them, trust means believing that this power will be used responsibly (Levi and Stoker 2000). It depends on the belief that government is both capable and well-intentioned (Barber 1983).

Public concern over trust intensified in the 1970s, when US surveys recorded sharp declines, and scholars debated the cause. Miller (1974) blamed policy failures, while Citrin (1974) argued that citizens still supported democratic norms but disapproved of specific outcomes. This distinction introduced two enduring pillars of trust: policy – the perceived effectiveness or competence of government (Citrin 1974) – and process – the perceived fairness of political procedures (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001, 2002). Subsequent work confirmed that citizens attend to both dimensions and that sustained failure on either can threaten even the deepest reservoir of trust (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002).

Parallel to this debate, two broader theoretical families emerged that offer competing explanations for the origins of trust. Cultural theories see trust as a deeply embedded, ‘exogenous’ trait, socialized early and reinforced by interpersonal trust (Mishler and Rose 1997, 2001; Newton and Norris 2000). High-trust societies, it is argued, spill over their generalized social trust onto political authorities (Putnam 2000; Uslaner 2002), making trust relatively stable and independent of short-term government actions.

In direct contrast, institutional performance theories treat trust as ‘endogenous’ – earned or squandered by what governments actually do (Levi and Stoker 2000; Newton and Norris 2000). From this perspective, citizens update their beliefs in a rational fashion: effective, honest, and fair governance breeds trust, while corruption, incompetence, or policy failure breeds distrust. Empirical work has often found strong support for this view. In post-Communist Europe, for instance, satisfaction with current performance and perceived corruption outweighed cultural predispositions in explaining trust (Mishler and Rose 2001). Similar patterns hold in mature democracies, where economic success and administrative competence bolster trust (Anderson and Tverdova 2003; Chanley et al. 2000; van Erkel and van der Meer 2016). Recent cross-national work reinforces the centrality of economic performance, identifying growth as a crucial determinant of trust in government (Goodhart and Vu 2025). This research, however, also highlights a ‘Trust Paradox’: the relationship between growth and trust is often weaker in mature democracies, and citizens in autocratic states that deliver strong economic results frequently report higher levels of trust (Goodhart and Vu 2025).

Recent work by Tai and Solt (2024) further refines this distinction using a new cross-national dataset on trust in civil servants from 1986 to 2022 and a model that separates short-term shocks from long-term, structural factors. Their analysis reveals that while positive short-term shifts in outcomes – such as GDP growth and falling unemployment – modestly boost trust, the most powerful and enduring determinant is the long-term quality of governance. Specifically, high levels of government effectiveness have a large and sustained positive effect on trust in civil servants, while chronically high homicide rates have a strong negative impact. These long-run institutional quality effects are substantially larger than the transient effects of economic performance. This distinction reinforces the view that citizens differentiate between temporary outcomes and the stable, underlying competence of state institutions, with the latter being fundamental to sustaining public trust (Tai and Solt 2024).

A more nuanced perspective moves beyond the dichotomy between cultural and institutional performance theories by emphasizing their coevolution. In this view, culture and institutions interact through mutual feedback loops: inherited values shape the demand for particular institutions, which in turn reinforce and transmit those values across generations, leading to self-reinforcing equilibria (Alesina and Giuliano 2015). A striking example of such path dependency is

provided by Nunn and Wantchekon (2011), who show that the historical intensity of the slave trade strongly predicts lower levels of interpersonal trust in Africa today. The slave trade undermined social cohesion and fostered a pervasive culture of mistrust that has endured over centuries. This legacy highlights how historical shocks can entrench societies in low-trust equilibria, with persistent cultural norms that continue to constrain institutional and economic development.

The empirical challenge is further complicated by evidence suggesting that trust varies across state branches, with distinct drivers for the government, courts, bureaucracy, and police. For elected branches (executive and legislature), studies suggest that trust hinges on output legitimacy – such as economic growth and policy delivery – and can be eroded swiftly by (corruption) scandals (Chang and Chu 2006; Morris and Klesner 2010). A foundational theory of legitimacy, advanced by Tyler (1990), posits that the public's willingness to accept legal authority hinges on procedural justice: the perception that institutional processes are fair, neutral, and respectful. According to this view, the fairness of the process can be more influential than the favorability of the outcome itself. However, the applicability of this theory may be context-dependent. In a study of the European Court of Justice, for instance, Gibson and Caldeira (1995) found that citizens' perceptions of procedural fairness had little to no direct effect on their willingness to accept an unpopular ruling. They argue that for a distant, transnational institution, the public may lack the direct experience required to form meaningful judgments about its procedures. Instead, their findings suggest that acceptance is driven by a deeper, more resilient 'diffuse support' – a general commitment to the institution's legitimacy that is independent of its specific actions or processes.

The bureaucracy seems to engender trust by demonstrating impartiality, efficiency, and responsiveness in frontline service encounters. Studies suggest that citizens' trust in public administration may depend more on these direct interactions than on broad policy outcomes (van de Walle and Bouckaert 2003), with bureaucratic impartiality emerging as a particularly critical element of 'good governance' that fosters positive public evaluations (Choi 2018). Likewise, trust in the police appears to combine process-oriented evaluations with community-specific experiences of fairness and respectful treatment. This work suggests that public assessments of the process of policing – judgments about the fairness and respect with which officers exercise their authority – often overshadow assessments of crime control effectiveness as the primary driver of police legitimacy and public cooperation (Jackson *et al.* 2024; Sunshine and Tyler 2003; Tyler 2005). However, the link between trust and specific cooperative behaviors like crime reporting is not always straightforward. Indeed, empirical work often finds that trust in the police, on its own, does not directly predict a higher likelihood of victims reporting offenses (Kääriäinen and Sirén 2011). Instead, its effect appears to be conditional on citizens' level of generalized social trust. In a study of Finnish crime victims, Kääriäinen and Sirén (2011) find that among citizens who trust their peers, lower trust in the police reduces crime reporting, as expected. Conversely, among citizens with low generalized trust, the relationship is inverted: those who trust neither their fellow citizens nor the police are the most likely to report crimes, suggesting that for this group, formal institutions are the only available recourse, regardless of their perceived quality (Kääriäinen and Sirén 2011).

Thus, the literature suggests that while both competence (eg reliability and responsiveness) and values (eg integrity, openness, and fairness) matter universally, their relative weights can vary substantially across institutions (OECD 2017a). Policy performance may be most critical for political bodies, procedural fairness for courts and police, and administrative efficiency for bureaucratic trust, a variation which demands an analytical approach that can distinguish between these various institutional targets.

Moreover, the relationship between citizens' direct experiences and institutional trust is empirically difficult to pin down. While the 'micro-performance hypothesis' – which posits that better quality public services lead to more satisfied users and, in turn, increased trust in government – is intuitive, the causal link is contested (Bouckaert *et al.* 2002; van de Walle and

Bouckaert 2003; Yang and Holzer 2006). Indeed, broad cross-national analyses have found no statistically significant correlation between indices of governance quality and levels of trust in government, complicating a simple performance-based story (Killerby 2005). Some scholars argue that the causality may be reversed: a citizen's pre-existing level of trust in government may color their perception of an agency's performance, rather than the performance evaluation shaping their trust (Bouckaert et al. 2002; van de Walle and Bouckaert 2003). This suggests that trust is not merely a rational response to service delivery but is also shaped by broader attitudes. Further complicating the picture, research in Norway – a country with a high level of government performance – finds that while satisfaction with specific public services does correlate with institutional trust, its effect is significantly weaker than that of broader political-cultural factors, chief among them a general satisfaction with the way democracy functions (Christensen and Laegreid 2005). This implies that in contexts where good performance is largely taken for granted, citizens may rely more on general political attitudes than specific service encounters when forming trust judgments (Christensen and Laegreid 2005).

Furthermore, studies suggest that trust is a general attitude; a high level of trust in one institution tends to be associated with high levels of trust in others, suggesting that citizens do not always differentiate sharply between various state entities (Bouckaert et al. 2002; Christensen and Laegreid 2005). This shift may be driven by broader social transformations, as evidence from across advanced industrial democracies suggests the erosion of trust has been sharpest among younger and more educated citizens, pointing not to a failure of government performance but to the rise of a more critical citizenry with higher expectations of its political institutions (Dalton 2005).

The literature also emphasizes that the effect of macro-level performance and procedural quality on citizen trust varies systematically across individuals, depending on their personal characteristics. The 'trust-as-evaluation' model implies that citizens must both perceive institutional realities accurately and care about them normatively for these factors to influence their trust judgments (van der Meer and Hakhverdian 2017). Political sophistication, often proxied by education, appears to be a key moderator; more educated citizens are better able to evaluate government performance and are more sensitive to procedural violations like corruption, leading to a stronger link between quality of government and trust among this group (Hakhverdian and Mayne 2012; Noordzij et al. 2021). Similarly, ideological congruence – the match between a citizen's preferences and those of elected elites – also shapes satisfaction. Evidence suggests that citizens are more responsive to 'egocentric congruence' (their personal ideological distance from the government) than to 'sociotropic congruence' (the distance between the government and the median citizen), particularly among the politically sophisticated (Mayne and Hakhverdian 2017). This underscores that the connection between macro-level governance and individual trust is fundamentally a micro-macro interactive relationship.

Bridging these perspectives, our study adopts the comprehensive two-dimensional framework of competence and values (Blind 2006; OECD 2017a). Competence – or capacity – concerns the government's ability to provide reliable services and respond effectively to shocks, while values capture the integrity, fairness, and openness of the policy process (OECD 2017a). These dimensions map neatly onto the foundational 'policy' (Citrin 1974) and 'process' (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001) notions, reflecting that citizens reward good outcomes but also care deeply about how those outcomes are produced (OECD 2017a). Various theoretical lenses reinforce this framework. Procedural justice theory, for example, places primary importance on the values dimension, arguing that the public's trust and the legitimacy they confer upon institutions are shaped more by the perceived fairness of procedures than by the effectiveness of outcomes (Hough et al. 2010; Sunshine and Tyler 2003). Conversely, performance-based theories emphasize the competence dimension, suggesting that citizens' trust is an evaluation of the quality and effectiveness of public service delivery (van de Walle and Bouckaert 2003). Together, these perspectives – from legitimacy theory's focus on rightful authority (Tyler and Huo 2002) to

principal–agent models of rational action (Tyler and Huo 2002) – converge on the idea that trust is a multifaceted judgment, resting on parallel assessments of both effective delivery (competence) and ethical conduct (values).

However, establishing the centrality of this framework does not resolve the deeper empirical challenges of measurement and causality. Traditional explicit surveys – like the World Values Survey items on trust in parliament or the long-standing American National Election Studies (ANES) question, ‘How much of the time do you trust the government in Washington to do what is right?’ – have provided invaluable trend data (Pew Research Center 2024). Yet, while foundational, these self-reports on trust can suffer from interpretation biases, transient political influences, and social desirability effects (Gershtenson and Plane 2007; Mishler and Rose 2001; Newton and Norris 2000).

To address this, a growing body of research has turned to implicit measures, such as the Implicit Association Test (IAT), which captures automatic, subconscious attitudes toward institutions. This research reveals a stark disconnect, suggesting that individuals who explicitly report distrust may still hold positive unconscious associations with government (Intawan and Nicholson 2018).¹

For instance, Intawan and Nicholson (2018) show that most Americans implicitly trust government even while explicitly professing distrust. They find that these two forms of trust are largely uncorrelated and that implicit trust varies little by partisanship or demographics. Furthermore, it predicts system justification and a willingness to rally behind government in a crisis, though not day-to-day policy preferences, suggesting it captures a distinct psychological construct. Similar findings have emerged from China, where 84 percent of respondents exhibit implicit trust, again uncorrelated with explicit responses (Huang et al. 2023). There, evaluations of government performance affect only explicit trust, implying that implicit trust is a more stable, affective orientation, perhaps rooted in political socialization (see also Nicholson and Huang 2023). Huang et al. (2024) also demonstrate that both forms of trust can independently increase susceptibility to state propaganda.

While this work powerfully highlights a critical measurement gap, it remains geographically concentrated and has yet to integrate implicit measures with behavioral data from incentivized economic experiments. Thus, it is largely unknown how these distinct layers of trust – explicit, implicit, and behavioral – relate to one another and to their potential determinants in a broad cross-national context. Our findings align closely with this literature – we too observe a divergence between explicit and implicit trust – but we extend it by examining these relationships across a diverse set of countries. In doing so, we show that while explicit trust is strongly associated with perceived government performance, implicit trust is instead significantly correlated with behavioral preferences like experimentally measured altruism and risk tolerance.

Summing up, the study of institutional trust is characterized by distinct theoretical traditions across the social sciences. Political science often frames trust as a component of political support, distinguishing between *specific support* for incumbent authorities and *diffuse support* for the regime itself (Citrin and Stoker 2018; Easton 1965), with trust levels often seen as an evaluation of governance quality, encompassing both performance and process (van der Meer and Ouattara 2019). Economics approaches trust through the lens of rational choice and incentives, where citizens, as principals, trust government agents when institutional arrangements provide credible commitments and ensure accountability, thereby lowering transaction costs for economic and social exchange (Algan and Cahuc 2010; Arrow 1972); behavioral economics further incorporates psychological factors such as altruism, risk, and betrayal aversion (Fehr 2009). In contrast,

¹In a related study, Hansford et al. (2018) use an IAT to assess perceptions of the US Supreme Court. They find it is implicitly viewed as less political than Congress but more political than a traffic court. Echoing our results, these implicit perceptions are uncorrelated with explicit survey-based measures. Yet both predict lower diffuse support for the Court, highlighting the behavioral relevance of implicit attitudes and the importance of capturing both attitudinal layers.

sociology views institutional trust as deeply embedded in the social fabric, emerging from a society's stock of social capital and generalized interpersonal trust rather than from short-term calculation (Putnam 1993; Uslaner 2002). Finally, public administration focuses on the implementation process, positing that trust is built or eroded through citizens' direct, 'street-level' encounters with the state and their assessment of procedural fairness (Tyler 1990; van de Walle and Bouckaert 2003).

This disciplinary specialization, however, leaves existing frameworks vulnerable to omitted variable bias. A robust literature across economics, psychology, and sociology links trust to a wide range of attitudes and behavioral traits often absent from standard political science models. These include underlying preferences and expectations such as risk attitudes (Fehr 2009), beliefs about others (Bouckaert et al. 2002), and social preferences like altruism, reciprocity, and inequality aversion measured in incentivized experiments (Falk and Fischbacher 2006; Fehr and Schmidt 1999; Kahneman et al. 1986). Psychological mechanisms like system justification (Jost 2004), social capital indicators like volunteering or neighborhood cohesion (Bekkers 2012; Putnam 2000; Sivesind et al. 2013), and views on societal issues like diversity (Alesina and La Ferrara 2002; Alesina and Tabellini 2024; Rothstein and Uslaner 2005), inequality (Anderson and Singer 2008), globalization and digitization (Swank 2003), religiosity (Schoenfeld 1978), and social mobility (Alesina et al. 2018) are all powerful predictors of social attitudes. By failing to account for these factors, studies focusing narrowly on governance perceptions may misattribute the importance of institutional performance.

To address this challenge, our paper adopts a multidisciplinary approach that explicitly integrates these diverse predictors to identify the most robust drivers of institutional trust. From political science, we incorporate standard models that emphasize the primacy of perceived governance quality – decomposed into its core dimensions of competence and values – and the role of partisanship in shaping political attitudes (Citrin and Stoker 2018; OECD 2017a; van der Meer and Ouattara 2019). From sociology, we integrate the aforementioned measures of social capital and societal attitudes (Putnam 2000; Reimann, Schilke and Cook 2017). Building on economics and behavioral economics, our framework includes the experimentally measured social preferences and individual risk attitudes highlighted above as potential confounds (Fehr 2009; La Porta, Lopez-de-Silanes, Shleifer et al. 1997). Finally, drawing from psychology and neuroscience, we move beyond traditional survey measures by using IATs to capture unconscious attitudes, testing whether these have different predictors than their explicit counterparts (Schilke, Reimann and Cook 2013, 2015; Stanley, Sokol-Hessner, Banaji et al. 2011).

This study addresses key limitations in prior frameworks by: (1) contributing to the debate on theoretical fragmentation between institutional and cultural–psychological explanations; (2) improving upon measurement by incorporating multiple types of trust indicators; and (3) mitigating concerns about omitted variable bias by including experimental measures of social preferences to capture unobserved behavioral traits. By leveraging the unique multidisciplinary Trustlab survey, we conduct a comprehensive 'horse race' between predictors drawn from across the social sciences. Our combination of self-reports, IATs, and incentivized experiments allows us to dissect the distinct correlates of explicit, implicit, and behavioral trust. This integrated approach enables us to provide one of the most robust tests to date of the determinants of institutional trust, clarifying whether perceived governance quality remains the primary driver after controlling for a vast array of potential individual and societal confounds.

Data, methods, and research question

Data

Trustlab is the most comprehensive cross-national effort to measure trust in both institutions and others. In each country, the survey combines self-reports, behavioral experiments, and IATs to

capture trust in institutions (eg government, civil servants, the judicial system, and the police) as well as interpersonal trust. It also collects a wide range of potential determinants, including perceptions of institutions, views on society, and measures of social preferences.

Country selection followed an open call by the OECD to institutions willing to finance data collection and adhere to a standardized methodology, rather than a systematic global sampling strategy. Still, the final sample captures substantial economic and cultural diversity. The six countries together account for roughly 40% of global GDP, underscoring their economic relevance. Culturally, the inclusion of Japan and Slovenia broadens the sample beyond the usual ‘WEIRD’ (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) societies highlighted by Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan (2010). Moreover, the dataset spans four of the eight cultural zones identified by Inglehart and Welzel (2005): Anglo-Saxon, Protestant Europe, Catholic Europe, and Confucian.

Each survey was administered online to a sample of approximately 1000 respondents, drawn by a private polling firm to be nationally representative by age, gender, and income. Participants received a fixed payment for completing the survey and an additional payoff based on their choices in a randomly selected behavioral module. To ensure data quality, exclusion criteria were applied using predefined validation checks (see Table A3, Online Appendix).

As shown in Table A2 (Online Appendix), the sample provides a broadly representative snapshot of national populations along the targeted variables of gender, education, and income. Gender distributions in particular closely mirror official statistics. Some deviations in socio-economic composition are expected and typical of online survey samples (see Alesina, Stantcheva and Teso 2018; Stantcheva 2023). In particular, individuals with higher education levels are overrepresented in several countries, notably Germany and Japan. Unemployed individuals are also somewhat overrepresented relative to official labor force statistics, especially in the United States and the United Kingdom.

Methods

Trustlab comprises three modules. Module 1 includes three incentive-compatible economic games to assess trust and social preferences. Module 2 contains an IAT for implicit trust in government and the judicial system. Module 3 is a survey covering self-reported trust, its determinants, and socio-demographic background. All measures are detailed in the Online Appendix.

The Trustlab survey was reviewed and approved by both the Statistics and Data Directorate and the Governance Directorate of the OECD. It was included in the official 2017–2018 Programme of Work and Budget of the Committee on Statistics and Statistical Policy, which comprises representatives from all OECD member countries. The survey instruments and experimental tasks raise no ethical concerns, as they are adapted from established sources such as the European Quality of Life Survey, European Social Survey, Eurobarometer, and peer-reviewed academic studies (see Online Appendix Table A1). All respondents gave written informed consent through the contracted polling company.

In Module 1’s games, participants interact anonymously and receive monetary payoffs based on decisions, computed post-survey. The Trust Game (Berg, Dickhaut and McCabe 1995) pairs participants as first and second movers, each endowed with €10 (or equivalent). The first mover transfers any multiple of €1 from 0 to 10; the second receives triple that amount and decides how much to return (0 to the tripled amount plus their €10). The transfer measures interpersonal trust, as the first mover risks non-reciprocation (Cox 2004; Kollock 1994), though altruism (Cetre, Algan, Grimalda et al. 2024; Kovacs, Dunaiski, Galizzi et al. 2024) and efficiency concerns (Engelmann and Strobel 2004) may influence it. The return measures trustworthiness (Cox, Kerschbamer and Neururer 2016).² Using the strategy method, second movers decide for all 11

²A game-theoretic Nash equilibrium for selfish agents predicts zero transfer and return, creating a social dilemma where individual optimality diverges from social optimality (Liebrand et al. 2015).

possible transfers (Brandts and Charness 2011), and first movers report what they expect the second mover would return if they sent €5. All participants play both roles.

The Public Goods Game (Fehr and Gächter 2000) measures cooperation in a social dilemma, with simultaneous actions altering its psychology from the Trust Game (Yamagishi and Kiyonari 2000). Trustlab includes both an unconditional version of the Public Goods Game, where respondents are not aware of the contribution of the other players; and a conditional version, where participants are asked to indicate their decisions for each of the possible mean contributions of the other three participants. The Dictator Game (Kahneman, Knetsch and Thaler 1986) isolates pure altruism.

IATs capture implicit institutional trust where self-reports may bias results (Greenwald, Nosek and Banaji 2003). IATs have been widely used to measure perceptions, stereotypes, and attitudes toward socially stigmatized groups, including Black individuals, women, and the elderly (Aberson, Shoemaker and Tomolillo 2004; Banaji and Greenwald 2013; Dasgupta and Asgari 2004). More recently, they have also been applied to assess implicit attitudes toward political parties and government institutions (Hawkins and Nosek 2012; Intawan and Nicholson 2018; Nicholson and Huang 2023; Raccuia 2016). Explicit measures suffer from interpretive ambiguity (eg ‘do what is right’ as moral, effective, or preference-aligned) (Gershtenson and Plane 2007), wording asymmetries inflating trust, and social desirability bias (Booth-Kewley, Larson and Miyoshi 2007).

Unlike traditional ‘two-sided’ IATs that contrast opposing categories (eg Black/White, Male/Female), the Trustlab version uses a ‘one-sided’ format (Bluemke and Fries 2008; Raccuia 2016). It presents a single target category – such as ‘Government’ – and pairs it with either ‘Trustworthy’ or ‘Untrustworthy.’ Respondents sort stimulus words into the correct category in both conditions. Faster sorting when ‘Government’ is paired with ‘Trustworthy’ yields a positive D-score, indicating higher implicit trust; faster sorting with ‘Untrustworthy’ yields a negative D-score, suggesting implicit distrust. The D-score reflects the latency of these associations. Respondents are randomly assigned to either the government or judiciary IAT version.

Module 3 surveys self-reported trust and determinants like individual traits, values, governance perceptions, and societal attitudes. Generalized interpersonal trust modifies the Rosenberg question to avoid caution bias – vulnerable groups (eg women, elderly) may report lower trust with the original wording: ‘Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?’ We, focusing on ‘trust’, use: ‘On a scale from zero to ten, where zero is ‘not at all’ and ten is ‘completely,’ in general, how much do you trust most people?’. Psychological traits associated with prosociality and trust were measured in the Italian and UK samples; a brief analysis of these data is provided in the Online Appendix.

On the methodological front, this study represents a state-of-the-art approach relative to recent high-quality work in the field (see Section Conceptual framework). Our analysis incorporates 40 potential predictors of institutional trust, selected from a comprehensive review of the economics, political science, sociology, and psychology literatures to ensure our models account for the main theoretical drivers identified in prior research. This multidisciplinary selection mitigates the risk of omitted variable bias that might otherwise distort coefficient estimates in more parsimonious models. For expositional clarity, we classify these predictors into three broad categories – individual characteristics, perceptions of institutions, and societal attitudes – as an organizing heuristic; this does not constrain the analysis, as explanatory power is computed for each variable individually. Predictors were measured using standard, appropriate methods, as detailed in Table A1 (Online Appendix). These include incentivized behavioral games to elicit social preferences (eg amounts sent in Trust, Dictator, and Public Goods games), standard survey questions on 0–10 Likert scales for attitudes and perceptions (eg willingness to take risks, satisfaction with public services), and direct demographic questions. This comprehensive approach enhances internal validity and sharpens the interpretation of each coefficient by minimizing the influence of potential confounders.

Reassuringly, we conducted a power analysis using G*Power (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang *et al.* 2007) for a fixed-set multiple regression with $k = 40$ predictors. Assuming a small effect size of $f^2 = 0.02$ (Cohen 1988), a sample of $N = 2005$ achieves $1 - \beta = 0.95$ power at a two-sided $\alpha = 0.05$. The squared semi-partial effect size, $f^2 = R^2 / (1 - R^2)$, captures the variance explained jointly by the predictors relative to residual variance. Given that our estimation samples include up to $N \approx 7000$ observations, statistical power approaches 1 – even under a Bonferroni-adjusted significance level of $\alpha = .00125$ to control for familywise error. These calculations confirm that our analyses are well powered to detect even modest effects.

Research question

This study reconciles evidence on institutional trust determinants by evaluating competing factors' relative importance, without favoring one theory. Among the factors outlined in Section Conceptual framework, political scientists have frequently emphasized governance quality – including integrity, shared values, and competencies such as responsiveness and effectiveness – as a central driver of trust in government (Citrin and Stoker 2018; Norris 2011). We formally test this view through the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: *Perceived governance quality is the most important determinant of trust in institutions, above partisanship, societal attitudes, social preferences, and other individual characteristics.*

While this hypothesis guides the core analysis, the study also examines the explanatory power of the broader set of factors. In particular, we assess which dimensions of governance quality matter most and how they compare to alternative drivers of institutional trust.

Results

Descriptive analysis

As illustrated in Figure 1, the data reveal generally low levels of institutional trust. Confidence in national governments averages just 3.9, with particularly low scores in Italy and Slovenia. Japan stands out for reporting the lowest levels of both interpersonal trust and trust in the police. A key finding, consistent with theories of performance-based legitimacy (see, eg Hetherington and Rudolph 2015), is that citizens clearly distinguish between institutions: trust in the police averages 5.7 – well above trust in government across all countries – possibly reflecting its more apolitical and service-oriented role.

Strikingly, the figure also visualizes the divergence between explicit and implicit attitudes. While the explicit trust measures are spread across the bottom 0–10 scale, the implicit (IAT) measures on the top axis are more clustered. This visual pattern is confirmed by statistical tests: while most cross-country differences in explicit trust and satisfaction are significant, t-tests show that differences in implicit trust scores between countries rarely are. For instance, for implicit trust in the judiciary, national averages are statistically indistinguishable in most pairwise comparisons, while for implicit trust in government, the few significant differences are driven primarily by comparisons involving Italy and the United States. This suggests that these subconscious attitudes are more stable across national contexts than their explicit counterparts, pointing to a latent reservoir of positive trust (see also Intawan and Nicholson 2018). Finally, the close alignment between self-reported (6.2) and experimental (5.9) measures of interpersonal trust reinforces the credibility of both approaches.

These cross-country differences in trust mirror underlying perceptions of how governments perform. Figure 1 visually confirms this link: countries with lower trust scores, such as Italy and Slovenia, also consistently show lower mean scores on performance metrics like government

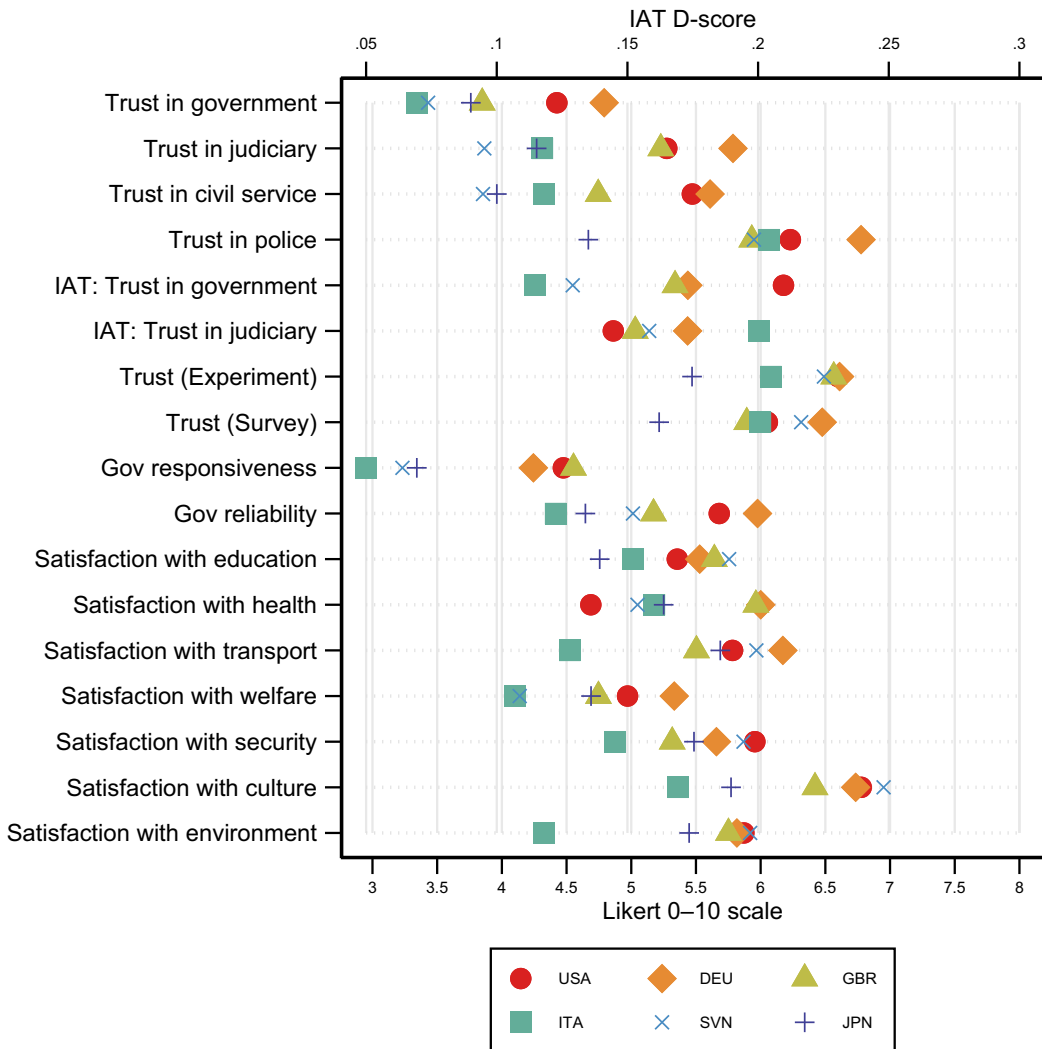


Figure 1. Mean trust and governance perceptions by country.

Notes: The figure plots the mean scores for each variable by country. Self-reported survey, experimental, and satisfaction measures are plotted on the bottom axis (0–10 Likert scale). Implicit Association Test (IAT) measures are plotted on the top axis (D-score scale). The legend indicates the marker corresponding to each country. DEU, GBR, ITA, JPN, SVN, and USA are the ISO codes for Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, Japan, Slovenia, and the United States.

responsiveness and reliability. In contrast, Germany and the United States, where trust in government is relatively higher, have markers further to the right on these same governance dimensions. Although the correspondence is not exact – Japan, for instance, shows moderate trust despite lukewarm performance ratings – the overall pattern supports a performance-based view of trust. That is, institutional trust appears to reflect citizens' assessments of how well government functions, rather than being purely cultural or static.

The correlation matrix in Figure 2 highlights three key findings. First, self-reported trust in different state institutions – government, the judiciary, civil service, and the police – are all highly correlated, with coefficients often exceeding 0.70, suggesting a strong, single dimension of explicit institutional trust. Second, and most critically, there is a stark disconnect between these explicit measures and their implicit counterparts. The correlations between explicit and implicit trust are

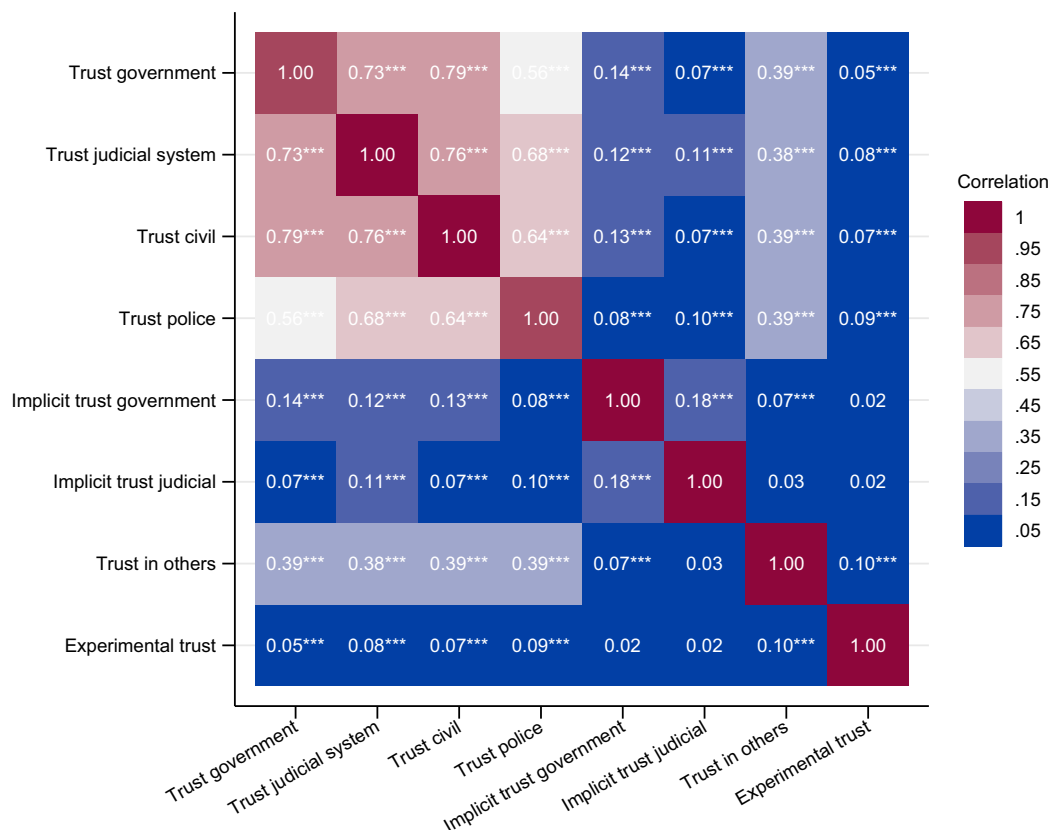


Figure 2. Correlation matrix of trust measures.
Notes: The figure displays Pearson's correlation coefficients between self-reported, implicit, and experimental trust measures from the pooled six-country sample. The color scale indicates the strength of the correlation, from high positive correlations (dark red) to weak or low correlations (blue). Asterisks denote statistical significance: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

consistently weak, typically below 0.15, reinforcing the view that they capture distinct psychological constructs. Third, while general trust in others is moderately associated with institutional trust (around 0.39), trust as measured in an experimental setting shows almost no relation to institutional attitudes.

A principal component analysis (PCA) helps uncover the underlying structure of the trust measures used in this study. Figure 3 maps all variables onto the first two principal components and reveals that trust measures cluster more by methodology – self-reported, implicit, or experimental – than by trust domain (eg institutional vs. interpersonal). This suggests that the mode of measurement is a key source of variation, raising concerns about potential ‘method effects’ in cross-study comparisons (Gershenson and Plane 2007).

Yet this methodological pattern likely reflects more than a measurement artifact. Implicit and behavioral tools are designed to capture intuitive, automatic forms of trust that operate below conscious awareness. Their proximity in the PCA implies they tap into a shared ‘gut-level’ trust that is distinct from the deliberative judgments elicited by self-reports. Importantly, this divergence appears domain-specific: for concepts like partisanship, implicit and explicit measures often align closely (Theodoridis 2017). That this is not the case for trust in our data supports the idea that people may hold dual attitudes – one conscious, the other automatic – when evaluating institutions (Intawan and Nicholson 2018).

Focusing on self-reported measures of institutional trust, Figure 4 reveals three distinct clusters. Trust in political bodies – government and parliament – forms one group; trust in core

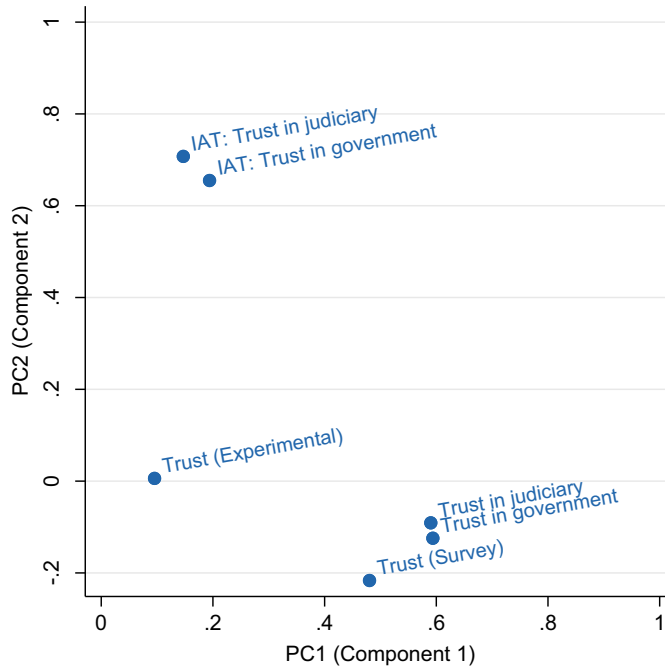


Figure 3. PCA of all trust measures by measurement type.

Notes: The plot shows the loading of each trust measure on the first two principal components.

administrative and legal institutions – the judicial system and civil servants – forms a second. Trust in the police stands apart, suggesting it is perceived as functionally and symbolically distinct from both political and bureaucratic branches of the state. This clustering aligns with classic theories of diffuse versus specific support (Citrin 1974; Miller 1974). According to these, trust in ‘deep’ institutions such as the judiciary and the police – those perceived as foundational and enduring – tends to reflect broader regime legitimacy. By contrast, trust in government and the parliament is more contingent, shaped by evaluations of incumbent performance. These distinctions foreshadow our regression-based results in the next section, where perceived governance quality emerges as a key driver of institutional trust.

Key explanatory factors of institutional trust

We analyze the determinants of trust using a multivariate framework with 40 individual-level variables. To handle missing data, we use multiple imputation for respondents with five or fewer missing values, excluding approximately 5% of the sample (see Online Appendix Table A3). All regressions use heteroskedasticity robust standard errors, and all explanatory variables are standardized to allow for comparison of effect sizes.

Table 1 reports the correlates of trust in different institutions, focusing on results significant at the 5% level or higher. Perceptions of government quality are the strongest predictors of self-reported institutional trust. For trust in government, perceived government reliability is the most important factor ($\beta = 0.336$, $p < 0.001$), followed by integrity of high-level officials ($\beta = 0.317$, $p < 0.001$) and satisfaction with public services, notably security ($\beta = 0.287$, $p < 0.001$) and education ($\beta = 0.283$, $p < 0.001$). For trust in the judicial system, satisfaction with security services is the dominant correlate ($\beta = 0.519$, $p < 0.001$), followed by satisfaction with education ($\beta = 0.261$, $p < 0.001$) and healthcare ($\beta = 0.256$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, trust in civil servants is most strongly associated with satisfaction with security ($\beta = 0.330$, $p < 0.001$) and perceived

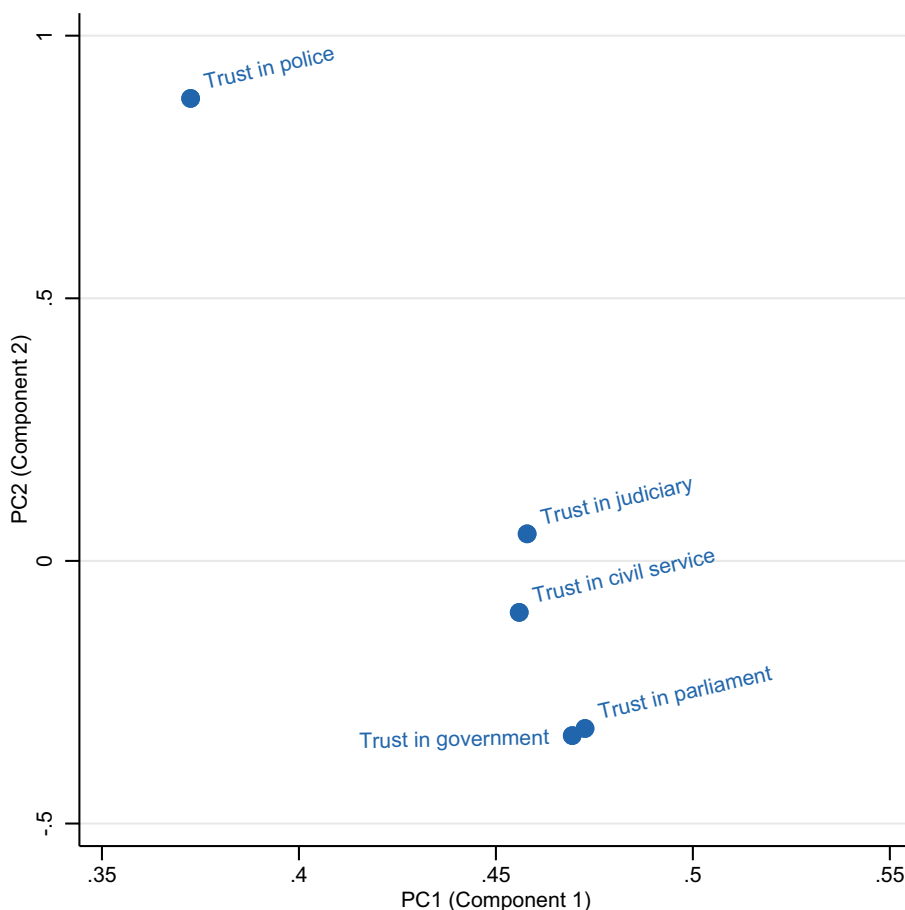


Figure 4. PCA of self-reported institutional trust measures.

Notes: The plot shows the loading of each self-reported institutional trust measure on the first two principal components.

integrity of government employees ($\beta = 0.229$, $p < 0.001$). Unsurprisingly, trust in the police is overwhelmingly determined by satisfaction with security and crime prevention services ($\beta = 1.034$, $p < 0.001$).

In contrast, implicit trust measures do not or only weakly correlate with perceptions of governance. The most significant predictor of implicit trust in government is experimental altruism ($\beta = 0.027$, $p < 0.01$), while for implicit trust in the judicial system it is age, with younger individuals showing less trust ($\beta = -0.038$, $p < 0.001$).

Table A7 details the results for self-reported trust in government for each country. Measures of perceived government quality are consistently the most important factors, though their relative importance varies. Perceived government reliability ranks first in Italy ($\beta = 0.435$, $p < 0.001$) and the United Kingdom ($\beta = 0.383$, $p < 0.001$) and is also significant in Germany ($\beta = 0.238$, $p = 0.007$), Japan ($\beta = 0.292$, $p < 0.001$), and Slovenia ($\beta = 0.196$, $p = 0.017$). High-level integrity is a top-five determinant in Germany, Slovenia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Satisfaction with security services is the top determinant in Germany ($\beta = 0.432$, $p < 0.001$) and is statistically significant in all countries. Satisfaction with education is the leading factor in Japan ($\beta = 0.362$, $p < 0.001$) and the United States ($\beta = 0.358$, $p = 0.001$) and is significant in Germany ($\beta = 0.225$, $p = 0.019$), Italy ($\beta = 0.190$, $p = 0.016$), and Slovenia ($\beta = 0.282$, $p < 0.001$), but not in the UK.

Table 1. The key correlates of trust in various institutions

Self-reported trust in government	Self-reported trust in judicial system	Self-reported trust in civil servants	Self-reported trust in the police	Implicit trust in government	Implicit trust in judicial system
Government reliability 0.336 ****	Satisfaction w/security and crime prevention 0.519 ****	Satisfaction w/security and crime prevention 0.330 ****	Satisfaction w/security and crime prevention 1.034 ****	Altruism (experimental) 0.027 ***	Age 18–34 –0.038 ****
Government integrity (high-level corruption) 0.317 ****	Country dummy SVN –0.265 ****	Country dummy SVN –0.305 ****	Country dummy JPN –0.327 ****	Country dummy ITA –0.022 **	Country dummy ITA 0.034 ****
Satisfaction w/security and crime prevention 0.287 ****	Satisfaction w/education service 0.261 ****	Government integrity (petty corruption) 0.229 ****	Government fairness 0.252 ****	Perceptions of social mobility 0.017 **	Satisfaction w/security and crime prevention 0.020 **
Satisfaction w/education service 0.283 ****	Satisfaction w/healthcare service 0.256 ****	Country dummy JPN –0.226 ****	Country dummy ITA 0.223 ****	Reciprocity (experimental) 0.015 **	Positive reciprocity 0.019 **
Satisfaction w/welfare benefits 0.236 ****	Government integrity (high-level corruption) 0.215 ****	Satisfaction w/education service 0.218 ****	Country dummy DEU 0.205 ****	Female respondent –0.015 **	Age 35–49 –0.017 **
Government responsiveness 0.192 ****	Government openness 0.208 ****	Government openness 0.198 ****	Age 18–34 –0.173 ****		Inactive in labor force 0.015 **
Partisan of current government 0.189 ****	Government reliability 0.180 ****	Government reliability 0.194 ****	Positive reciprocity 0.156 ****		
Satisfaction w/healthcare service 0.181 ****	Government integrity (petty corruption) 0.173 ****	Government fairness 0.186 ****	Government integrity (petty corruption) 0.141 ****		
Government fairness 0.180 ****	Attitude toward immigration (culture) 0.160 ****	Satisfaction w/welfare benefits 0.180 ****	Satisfaction w/education service 0.125 ****		
Country dummy JPN 0.164 ****	Government fairness 0.159 ****	Government responsiveness 0.176 ****	Satisfaction w/healthcare service 0.112 ***		
Religiosity 0.141 ****	Country dummy DEU 0.157 ****	Government integrity (high-level corruption) 0.145 ****	Age 35–49 –0.096 ****		
Financial security 0.139 ****	Satisfaction w/welfare benefits 0.128 ****	Country dummy GBR –0.126 ****	Altruism (survey) 0.085 ***		
Country dummy DEU 0.139 ****	Right-wing political orientation –0.117 ***	Altruism (survey) 0.112 ****	Left-wing political orientation –0.083 ***		
Neighborhood connectedness 0.113 ****	Government integrity (revolving door) –0.112 ***	Attitude toward immigration (culture) 0.101 ****	Government openness 0.082 **		
Government openness 0.083 **	Partisan of current government 0.110 ****	Religion 0.099 ****	Risk-loving –0.081 ***		
Perceptions of social mobility 0.080 ***	Left-wing political orientation 0.101 ***	Neighborhood connectedness 0.095 ****	Perceptions of social mobility 0.077 ***		
Country dummy SVN –0.078 **	Government responsiveness 0.094 **	Financial security 0.082 ***	Income in quintile 5 0.063 **		
Attitude toward immigration (culture) 0.065 **	Age 18–34 –0.089 ****	Donation (experimental) 0.068 ****	Income in quintile 4 0.055 **		

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Self-reported trust in government	Self-reported trust in judicial system	Self-reported trust in civil servants	Self-reported trust in the police	Implicit trust in government	Implicit trust in judicial system
Government integrity (petty corruption) −0.065 **	Country dummy GBR 0.082 ***	Age 18–34 −0.067 ***	Born in country 0.047 **		
Country dummy GBR −0.065 **	Perceptions of social mobility 0.077 **	Partisan of current government 0.064 ***			
Attitude to inequality (tax ratio) −0.051 **	Donation (experimental) 0.076 ****	Negative reciprocity −0.055 **			
Globalization attitude 0.051 **	Tertiary education 0.074 **	Income in quintile 2 0.052 **			
	Globalization attitude 0.071 ***	Info from Internet (none) −0.045 **			
	Religiosity 0.065 **				
	Financial security 0.062 **				
	Positive reciprocity 0.055 **				
	Info from Internet (none) −0.045 **				

Notes: This table reports OLS estimates with heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors. Results are based on multiple imputation. The analysis sample retains respondents with five or fewer missing covariate values. Missing covariates are multiply imputed ($m = 10$) in Stata using `mi impute mvn`. All independent variables are normalized. Variables are ranked by decreasing order of the coefficient's absolute value. Variables belonging to the category of perceived governance quality are highlighted in blue. * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$; **** $p < 0.001$.

Our analysis by country reveals 64 coefficients significant at the 5% level or better, presented in Table A7 (Online Appendix). Of these, 37 relate to measures of perceived governance quality. The coefficients for these governance variables are all signed as expected, with two exceptions: satisfaction with public transportation in Slovenia ($\beta = -0.293$, $p < 0.001$) and perceived petty corruption in the United States ($\beta = -0.220$, $p = 0.023$). These counterintuitive signs are attributable to collinearity with other, more dominant governance variables in the respective models. We also note that having a political orientation aligned with the incumbent government significantly correlates with higher trust, except in Germany and Slovenia. While perceptions of governance quality are the primary correlates of trust across all countries, some country-specific factors are also important. These include societal attitudes, such as those toward immigration in Germany ($\beta = 0.217$, $p = 0.002$) or social mobility in the United Kingdom ($\beta = 0.255$, $p = 0.002$), and individual characteristics like religiosity in Japan and the United Kingdom. Interestingly, economic factors are largely not significant, with the notable exceptions of Japan, where financial security and income are key correlates, and Slovenia, where financial security is also a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.130$, $p = 0.040$).

In unreported regressions that control for standard covariates, interpersonal trust does not significantly predict trust in any state institution, consistent with institutional and interpersonal trust being distinct (Bahry, Kosolapov, Kozyreva et al. 2005). This pattern holds across each country sample for self-reported trust in government, suggesting that while generalized trust in others underpins social capital and everyday economic exchanges (Putnam 2000), it operates independently from evaluations of formal institutions.

Discussion

Institutional trust spans economics, sociology, political science, public management, and psychology. While trust is widely seen as a complex construct (Christensen and Laegreid 2005; Dalton 2005), most studies examine measures in isolation, overlooking insights from other fields. This paper systematically tests correlates from diverse disciplines, revealing that self-reported trust in government correlates most strongly with perceptions of governance and public service quality, above societal or individual factors.

A long-standing tradition in political science distinguishes between *specific support* – the conditional approval of incumbent leaders and policies – and the more enduring *diffuse support* directed at the broader political system or regime itself (Citrin 1974; Easton 1965; Miller 1974). Specific support is sensitive to short-term developments in the political and economic landscape, responding to factors such as economic growth, political scandals, or military casualties (Hetherington 1998; OECD 2013). Diffuse support, by contrast, is shaped over the long run through civic education, socialization, and attachment to democratic norms and institutions (Intawan and Nicholson 2018; Levi and Stoker 2000).

This conceptual distinction is reflected in the measurement literature. Self-reported items, which require conscious deliberation, tend to capture specific support. In contrast, IATs bypass reflective evaluation and tap into more affective, intuitive orientations that align with diffuse support (Greenwald, McGhee and Schwartz 1998; Jost 2004). Our empirical findings support this interpretation: implicit trust correlates with stable traits – such as age and childhood socioeconomic background – as well as with prosocial preferences from economic games, yet shows little association with perceived government competence (Table 1). Explicit trust, by contrast, closely follows perceived institutional performance. In short, while citizens revise their stated trust in response to current governance, their implicit trust reflects a deeper, historically rooted orientation.

These results contribute to the broader debate on trust by highlighting a fundamental divergence between its explicit and implicit dimensions. The weak correlation we observe between implicit trust and performance perceptions mirrors prior findings showing a disconnect between IAT outcomes and survey responses (Huang, Intawan and Nicholson 2023; Intawan and

Nicholson 2018). This supports the notion that individuals may be ‘of two minds’, holding deliberative evaluations alongside more automatic, intuitive attitudes (Intawan and Nicholson 2018). For example, research in China shows that while explicit trust responds to performance, a latent baseline of implicit trust persists – likely shaped by long-term socialization or exposure to state narratives (Huang *et al.* 2024). This cognitive duality is further illustrated by our PCA, where trust measures cluster by method rather than institutional target (Figure 3).

Hence, this pattern likely reflects more than just a methodological artifact, as it aligns with cognitive distinctions emphasized in dual-process theories of judgment and decision-making. These theories differentiate between System 1, which governs fast, intuitive thinking, and System 2, which underlies slow, deliberative reasoning (Kahneman 2011; Stanovich and West 2000). Therefore, our results suggest that self-reported trust, which requires conscious reflection, primarily captures System 2 evaluations. In contrast, implicit and behavioral measures appear to access System 1 processes – automatic, gut-level attitudes that arise spontaneously and without conscious awareness (Haidt 2001).

This interpretation is further supported by the significant correlation between our implicit measure of trust in government and altruistic behavior in the dictator game. Both involve minimal deliberation, indicating they may draw on a common intuitive foundation. The convergence of two different non-verbal, non-reflective measures strengthens the view that these tools capture a distinct, automatic layer of trust. Understanding this distinction is particularly crucial in a time of widespread distrust. In the United States, for example, explicit trust in government hovers around 20% (Pew Research Center 2024). Yet, the presence of a latent reservoir of implicit trust suggests that even amid overt skepticism, an underlying affective orientation toward institutions may persist. This implicit trust could serve as a source of institutional resilience, offering a potential foundation for rebuilding confidence when explicit trust collapses (Algan, Guriev, Papaioannou *et al.* 2017; Intawan and Nicholson 2018; Krastev 2011).

Our findings further suggest that perceived governance quality outweighs political affiliation in explaining institutional trust, though both play important roles. This supports a growing body of research distinguishing between perceptions of ‘government competence’ – the extent to which service delivery meets expectations – and ‘government values,’ such as fairness, integrity, and ethical behavior (Blind 2006; Bouckaert 2012; Nooteboom 2007; Rothstein 2011; Yang and Holzer 2006). Recent OECD studies similarly emphasize both dimensions as essential to trust in public institutions (Brezzi, González, Nguyen *et al.* 2021; OECD 2021, 2022a, 2022b).

Trustlab results corroborate this framework. Competence-related factors – such as satisfaction with public services, perceived responsiveness (Kampen, Maddens and Vermunt 2003), and reliability (See 2009) – emerge as key drivers of trust among the considered factors. So do value-based indicators, including perceived integrity (Esaiasson, Gilljam and Persson 2012; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001; Rothstein 2013), openness (Kim and Lee 2012; Stiglitz 2002; Traber 2013), and procedural fairness (Tyler 1987; Tyler, Goff and MacCoun 2015). Importantly, evaluations of high-level officials’ integrity link trust to incumbent behavior (Bowler and Karp 2004; Dahlström and Lapuente 2017), while perceptions of petty corruption erode trust in the civil service, reflecting the importance of day-to-day bureaucratic interactions (Thomas 1998).

Our study also relates to the work of social scientists interested in better understanding the role of fundamental social preferences such as altruism or cooperation in the formation of trust. A number of studies show that social preferences assessed in the lab translate into real-world outcomes (Algan and Cahuc 2014; Benz and Meier 2008; Charness and Fehr 2015; Karlan 2005; Laury and Taylor 2008; de Oliveira, Croson and Eckel 2015), although the evidence is still debated (Campos-Mercade, Meier, Schneider *et al.* 2021; Galizzi and Navarro-Martinez 2019; Levitt and List 2007). Unlike self-reported trust in others, experimental trust shows a more consistent and robust association with social preferences, whether measured through survey items or

behavioral games (see Table A6, Online Appendix). While the self-reported measure also correlates significantly with experimental indicators of altruism, expected trustworthiness, and survey-based measures of positive reciprocity and risk preferences, the coefficients are generally smaller and less stable.

In a similar vein, this study builds on prior work by Falk, Becker, Dohmen et al. (2018), who developed a global database of socioeconomic preferences, including a measure of self-reported interpersonal trust. In earlier validation work based on an experiment with 409 students from the University of Bonn, this self-reported trust measure was found to correlate with an experimental trust game, lending support to its behavioral relevance. Their studies and ours have five countries in common, namely Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In both studies, Japan is the country with the lowest level of self-reported interpersonal trust. We consistently find that among the five countries in common, Germany displays the highest level of average experimental trust in others (see Figure 1).

The analysis remains subject to two main caveats. First, large measurement errors may affect IAT measures of institutional trust, which may explain the low R^2 in the corresponding regressions (about 4%). Second, our analysis does not identify causal relationships, as no convincing instruments exist for such a large number of explanatory variables.

Nonetheless, by controlling for an unprecedented 40 variables drawn from multiple disciplines – including social preferences, societal attitudes, and individual traits – we mitigate omitted variable bias that plagues narrower studies, yielding associations that are more reliable than simple bivariate correlations (Angrist, Lang and Oreopoulos 2009). This approach echoes prior work in behavioral economics, where extensive controls help isolate key predictors of trust even without randomization, such as the examination of inherited cultural trust across generations by Algan and Cahuc (2010). Endogeneity remains a concern: perceptions of governance quality could be shaped by preexisting trust levels, or both might stem from unobserved factors like historical experiences (Nunn and Wantchekon 2011). Future research could build on our findings by employing causal methods, such as natural experiments from policy reforms or instrumental variables based on historical shocks, to test whether improving perceived competence and integrity directly boosts trust (Alesina and Giuliano 2015). In this vein, our results provide a foundation for such inquiries, highlighting governance perceptions as prime candidates for intervention. Ultimately, while correlations do not imply causation, the dominance of governance factors in our horse race suggests they warrant priority in efforts to rebuild trust in polarized societies.

Practically, our findings offer a compelling message for policymakers: institutional trust can be bolstered through tangible improvements in public service delivery – especially in domains like education and security, which emerge as the most consistent predictors across countries (OECD 2017a). This is particularly salient against the backdrop of rising populism and political polarization (Algan, Guriev, Papaioannou et al. 2017; Guriev and Papaioannou 2022; Inglehart and Norris 2016). As shown in the Online Appendix (Table A6), extreme-left and extreme-right political orientations are strongly associated with attitudes toward immigration, perceptions of government fairness, and, to a lesser extent, religiosity – albeit with coefficients pointing in opposite directions. Immigration, in particular, stands out as a deeply polarizing issue that fuels both sides of the spectrum. By contrast, these extreme views are only weakly linked to perceptions of governance quality, which explain less than 10% of their variance.

This divergence underscores an important distinction: while trust in government is primarily driven by perceived competence and integrity, political radicalization is rooted in broader societal attitudes – factors that are far less amenable to short-term policy interventions. Crucially, we also find that institutional and interpersonal trust are largely uncorrelated once a broad set of controls is included. This decoupling implies that strong community-level cooperation, often grounded in inherited cultural norms, does not automatically translate into trust in the state (Alesina and Giuliano 2015; Algan and Cahuc 2010). From a policy perspective,

this is encouraging. It suggests that institutional trust is not hardwired into culture: it can be rebuilt through concrete improvements in public sector performance.

This is particularly relevant in low-trust contexts, where targeted reforms may yield outsized returns in legitimacy and economic outcomes (Nunn and Wantchekon 2011). Such reforms should be tailored to local deficits. In Italy and Slovenia, where perceptions of elite corruption strongly predict distrust, anti-corruption audits and transparency initiatives may be most effective (Rothstein 2011). In the United States, enhancing perceived procedural fairness in the judiciary through public consultation may help restore confidence. In Japan, improving welfare reliability may resonate with cultural priorities around social harmony (Algan, Guriev, Papaioannou *et al.* 2017). These differentiated, performance-based strategies – if causally validated – offer a pragmatic roadmap to reverse trust erosion without waiting for slow-moving cultural change.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1475676526100875>.

Data availability statement. The Trustlab database and all replication codes are available from the authors upon request for replication of the results or for research purposes.

Competing interests. The author(s) declare none.

Preregistration. This research has not been preregistered in an independent institutional registry.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process. During the preparation of this work, the authors used OpenAI's ChatGPT and Google's Gemini to assist with language editing and the construction of LaTeX tables. The authors subsequently reviewed and edited all content as necessary and take full responsibility for the published article.

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