

# TiGRE policy brief

## Assessing social and political trust: a systematic review

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### /// INTRODUCTION

Social, political and institutional trust has been the object of numerous surveys over the last couple of decades. These surveys usually have the goal to determine the level of trust in various actors or between actors. Needless to say, to be aware of the levels of trust is also to be aware of the health of our democracies. For these reasons, one of the numerous goals of TiGRE (Trust in Governance and Regulation in Europe) Project is to identify and to fill in the main gaps of the existent surveys, with an aim of providing a broader and more fine-grained overview of the level of trust in our democracies. In fact, in TiGRE we believe that trust is not just a matter of vertical relations between citizens and public authorities. Instead, attention should also be given to **horizontal trust relationships between actors that are part of the rule-making process, such as public agencies and courts**. In addition, in TiGRE we argue that being aware of these less visible trust relationships is a prerequisite for enhancing policy-making and for designing appropriate policy design. The first policy brief of the TiGRE project addresses some of these issues. The goals of TiGRE policy brief are twofold:

- / To summarize the main findings of a systematic review of scientific contributions on political trust, which exploit the main results based on opinion surveys, focusing on trustee-related and trustor-related drivers of trust;
- / To highlight the main gaps that we have identified, and to show how, in particular, the TiGRE's ongoing survey could remedy these gaps.

### /// A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF STUDIES ON POLITICAL TRUST<sup>1</sup>

**As a first step, the TiGRE team undertook an expansive effort to systematically review those studies that address trust in government, trust in private or civil society actors), and that rely on eight major large-scale international surveys.**

Criteria for inclusion	Surveys
Eight surveys were chosen as a subject of inquiry and comparison.	1. The World Values Survey (WVS) 2. European Quality of Government Index –Individual Survey (QoG EQI) 3. The International Social Survey Programme (ISSP)
Some of the datasets cover countries from all over the world (such as Gallup, ISSP and WVS) while others focus mainly on European countries (QoG, Eurobarometer, EVS, EQLS and ESS).	4. Eurobarometer 5. The European Social Survey (ESS) 6. The European Values Study (EVS) 7. Gallup World Poll 8. European Quality of Life Surveys (EQLS)

*We selected cross-country, observational studies on trust between 2015 and 2020 and two related concepts (confidence and corruption) that use the aforementioned surveys.*

Our main results can be summarised as follows:

- / 109 of the articles in our dataset focus on 'trust' as a concept and 22 of articles operationalise their variable of interest as 'confidence'
- / 20 articles deal with corruption, suggesting a reasonable degree of interest in this concept – and, thus, its relevance when reviewing citizen relationships vis-a-vis governmental and other societal actors.

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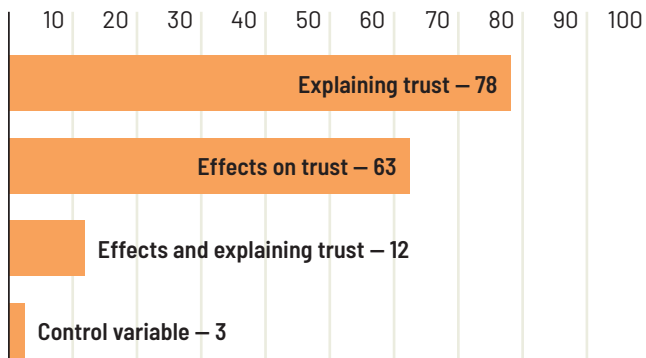


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<sup>1</sup> The full review and additional information can be found in the TiGRE report "Meta-analysis of empirical trust studies and data sources", available upon request on [www.tigre-project.eu/contact](http://www.tigre-project.eu/contact)

- / One article deals with concepts that are arguably subdimensions of trust, i.e. perceived integrity, fairness, and impartiality.

Furthermore, considerable attention is being devoted to both the drivers and the effects of trust. 78 studies focus on explaining trust, 63 on its effects and 12 on both drivers and effects (with the remaining 3 articles using trust as a control variable).



As we may expect from a cross-disciplinary literature review of a concept as widely applicable as trust, there is substantial variation in the theoretical approaches used to capture trust. Most studies (104) use a sui generis approach, developing an analytical framework without a specific theoretical underpinning. While the remaining 67 articles did use an explicit theoretical approach, dominant approaches were difficult to identify. One exception is social capital theory, which is explicitly called upon in 3 contributions.

In terms of data used and analysis strategy:

- / 80 reviewed studies use one survey dataset or incorporate multiple surveys, while 76 of the studies rely on other non-survey sources. The ESS is the most often employed survey (68 studies), followed by the WVS (35) and the Eurobarometer (19).
- / Only one study combines quantitative and qualitative analyses, indicating a need for mixed methods research in the future.
- / A considerable amount of studies analyze these surveys using inferential statistics (154), such as various forms of regression models or structural equation models. Out of these, 69 studies draw upon some form of longitudinal design, mostly panel data estimations or multiple cross-sectional analyses.
- / Only a small number of analyses rely on purely descriptive statistics (12).

As to the drivers of trust, 90 studies in total strive to find explanations of levels of trust in actors. We, thus, distinguished between **trustor-related** and **trustee-related** drivers.

## // Trustor-related drivers

We provide here an overview of factors related to individuals trusting another actor, which may range from personal characteristics, attitudes and perceptions creating a diverse palette of potential drivers.

- / Personal characteristics (generalized trust, age, gender and health)

Among personal characteristics, possessing a predisposition for generalized trust finds relatively consistent support as a predictor of trust in government or in other actors.

Pitlik & Couba (2015) find that individuals who display low generalized trust in others tend to also display relatively low trust in governmental and private actors. Similarly, Buriak et al. (2019) observe that higher interpersonal trust has a positive effect on trust in banks, while finding no significant effect of institutional trust (trust in courts and trust in governments). By using a slightly different approach, Dellmuth & Tallberg (2015) find that confidence in political institutions also predicts whether someone trusts the United Nations. Individuals' **predisposition to trust governments and other actors may also be formed through other relatively unchangeable factors such as age, gender, and health**. Women, for example, have been reported having higher levels of political trust than men (Coromina & Kustec, 2020; Mattila & Rapeli, 2018), while age seems to be negatively associated with trust (Coromina & Kustec, 2020; García-Albacete, Lorente, 2019). Furthermore, Reher (2018) reports that possessing a disability may be negatively related to political trust, suggesting that health status may be a predictor of trust.

## / Education and social status

Another individual-level predictor, which is often cited in the reviewed studies is the effect of education and social status on institutional trust. Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova (2015), for instance, find this relationship to hold for most countries in their sample, although Slovakia and Bulgaria were notable exceptions, while Aydin & Şekerçioğlu (2016) find that education raises confidence in judicial actors, and Ruelens et al. (2018) find that education – used as a proxy for social status – is positively associated with trust in national parliament. Van Erkel & Van der Meer (2016) nuance the relationship between education and trust, observing that the positive impact of macro-economic performance on political trust is moderated by education, in the sense that less educated individuals are impacted more strongly by their varying perceptions of performance. **While education is frequently reported as a driver of trust, the variable seems to be intertwined with multiple macro-level factors.**

Contributions focusing more on social status also find positive effect. Kotze & Garcia-Rivero (2017), for instance, find that elites have more trust in institutions than the general public, while Dotti & Magistro (2016) observe a greater decline in trust in institutions among respondents from lower social strata, although Koivula, Saarinen & Räsänen (2017) suggest these dynamics may differ across party boundaries.

## / Political ideology, beliefs and attitudes

Among the most prominently studied themes is the influence of ideology and political beliefs on trust in government and politics. In this context, it is worth mentioning Hooghe, Marien & Oser's (2017) observation that high levels of political trust are not necessarily desirable. They find that highly idealistic respondents frequently experience less political trust, in particular in countries where the quality of government is low. limited. As such, the negative effect of strong democratic ideals may be indicative of critical citizens. Other contributions suggest that trust in government may be tied to political beliefs, with individuals who hold populist ideas and left-authoritarian citizens exhibiting lower levels of institutional confidence (Koivula, Saarinen & Räsänen, 2017; Hillen & Steiner, 2020). Although not directly measuring political preferences, similar findings have been put forward with regard to fears of migration, with both Chacha & Kobayashi (2018) and Jeannot (2020) finding that such fears reduce trust in government, while Brosius, Van Elsas & De Vreese (2019) find

a negative impact of refugee news coverage on trust in government among right-wing voters specifically. **Together, these findings confirm that recent surges in populism and anti-immigration sentiments are related to a drop in trust in government and politics.** The counterpoint that emerges is that when lower trust is due to ideologically critical citizens, this is not necessarily undesirable.

## / Political participation/involvement

Further relevant effects have been reported with respect to active political involvement. Bozogáňová & Výrost (2019) find that citizens who regularly participate in the political process exhibit higher levels of trust in various national-level public entities (e.g., parliament, legal system and police), as well as higher levels of trust in the EU and the UN. Hooghe & Kern (2015) provide further context to this argument by finding no relationship between party membership and political trust. Instead, they observe, political trust seems to be determined by the degree of closeness to a political party. **These results suggest not only that recent drops in party membership may not be problematic from a trust perspective, but that one also need to consider the heterogeneous forms that political involvement may take.**

## / Migrant status

Trust may also differ per social group, with some attention being devoted to the different level of trust in government exhibited by migrants or ethnic and religious minorities. Results are, however, mixed. On the one hand, Helliwell, Wang & Xu (2016) find no evidence that migrant status is related to political trust, arguing that migrants' attitudes are determined by social norms in their host country. A similar observation is provided by Voicu & Tufiş (2017), who find that living in a country where others are confident in institutions is a better predictor of confidence than country-of-origin variables. Conversely, Isani & Schlipphak (2017) note that European Muslims are relatively trustful of national institutions, an attitude that extrapolates to international organizations, arguing that a positive effect exists. **Hence, these studies on the migrant status as a driver of trust suggests that further research may be necessary to evaluate competing insights or potential mediating factors.**

## / Exposure to media

An increasingly relevant area of attention is the consumption of and exposure to (new forms of) media. You & You and Wang (2020), furthermore, find that internet use in general is related to lower trust in political institutions, although this effect is stronger in regimes where offline expressions are restricted. Finally, Brosius, Van Elsas & De Vreese (2019) find that news coverage of immigration reduces trust in the EU, although the effect is mediated in the sense that left-wing citizens show no changes in their evaluation, while right-wing oriented citizens show a stronger decrease of trust in the EU. **Together, these studies suggest a complex relationship between internet usage, news consumption and trust, in which specific media sources may play an important mediating role.**

## // Trustee-related drivers

With regard to trustee-related drivers, we focus on the characteristics of the actor that is being trusted. This concerns aspects such as perceived fairness or perceived performance of the actor in question.

## / Government performance and responsiveness

A major discussion is whether government and politicians' performance can impact favourably attitudes toward government among citizens. Several contributions in our sample deal with this topic by studying the impact of performance on trust in government. Bešić (2016) finds that satisfaction with government is the most reliable predictor of confidence in institutions in six countries. Goubin (2018) finds that politicians' responsiveness to citizens is strongly related to political trust, albeit this relationship is less strong in relatively unequal societies. Bustikova & Corduneanu (2017) find a significant impact of state capacity on trust in the civil service, using historical infant mortality rates as a proxy for historic state capacity. **The studies in our review, thus, consistently suggest that – at least at the macro-level – governmental performance contributes to trust in politicians and governments.**

## / Perceptions of fairness and/or (procedural) justice

A related discussion pertains to the degree to which a government's or another actor's actions are considered fair and/or procedurally just. In this category, we find contributions dealing with the effects of discrimination (Piatkowska, 2015; Jeong, 2016) and fair treatment (Ariely & Uslaner, 2017; Marien & Werner, 2019) on trust in government or related actors. These findings suggest that, for example, perceived discrimination reduces confidence in police (Piatkowska, 2015) or that perceptions of fair treatment by government reduces the belief that corruption exists (Ariely & Uslaner, 2017). Governments can thus actively shape trust in government through their actions, with fair treatment increasing trust, while forms of unfair treatment (such as discrimination) reduce it. Jeong (2016) argues that discrimination should itself be seen as a multidimensional construct, distinguishing between discrimination based on color, nationality, religion, language, ethnicity, age, language, gender, sexuality, and disability. While most of these forms of discrimination reduce the political trust of the first generation of immigration, effects of religion- and language-based discrimination disappear among second-generation immigrants (Jeong, 2016). **This illustrates that individual-level characteristics may moderate the relationship between trustee-related characteristics and trust.**

The table below summarizes the factors related to trustor and trustee related variables.

Category	Variable
Trustor-related driver	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Generalized Trust (Personality traits, Age, Gender, Health status)</li><li>2. Education and Social status</li><li>3. Political ideology, beliefs and attitudes</li><li>4. Political participation/involvement</li><li>5. Migrant status</li><li>6. Exposure to media</li></ol>
Trustee-related drivers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Government performance, responsiveness to citizens</li><li>2. Perceptions of fairness and/or (procedural) justice</li></ol>



## /// DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present policy brief summarizes the main findings of a systematic review of scientific contributions on political trust. In particular it pays attention two types of drivers: trustor-related and trustee-related.

Only four studies seemed to be interested in studying the dynamics of trust in non-governmental actors. Similarly, no existing surveys are able to provide reliable measurements on the levels of trust between governmental institutions and non-governmental collective actors, including, for example courts, intermediaries, regulators and regulatees. A viable avenue for further research may, therefore, be the study of interrelationships between trust in public actors and other systemic factors, in particular when related to major societal developments such as crises or the installation of new governments following events such as revolutions. Do downturns in trust in political actors mirror drops in trust in press, corporations or banks? Are perhaps non-governmental actors shielded from the impact of crises on trust to the same degree as public sector actors? Answering these questions may have important implications for policy design. If, for example, corruption scandals strongly reduce trust in private actors involved in these scandals, this may imply greater trust for regulation by public bodies with limited involvement of private actors. Bridging sectoral divides in research on trust, thus, seems an important area of attention for future studies.

The initial stages of the TiGRE project aim to address some of these open questions. This is done by, first, a systematic comparison of the regulatory regimes of three policy sectors (Food Safety, Finance, and Data Protection (focusing on health data and electronic communication of personal data)) in the nine countries taking part in the project (Switzerland, Belgium, Spain, Israel, Germany, Denmark, Norway, Netherlands and Poland). This comparison will be essential for providing an overview of the backbone of each regulatory regime, including the main events and main reforms, which have shaped them. Hence, comparisons between countries are key to observe similarities but also differences in terms of trust dynamics and trust relationships. Second, the TiGRE project also aims to measure levels of trust between actors composing the regulatory regimes, such as governmental and non-governmental actors (including courts and quasi-judicial bodies, regulatory intermediaries, and stakeholder organizations). TiGRE's cross-country survey targets a broad range of

regulatory actors, with an aim to explore if markets and the way they are regulated create trust on behalf of citizens, consumers and other actors. TiGRE survey will provide an overview that will represent a further step forward to understand and explain trust in our democracies.

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