

# Trust and Democracy

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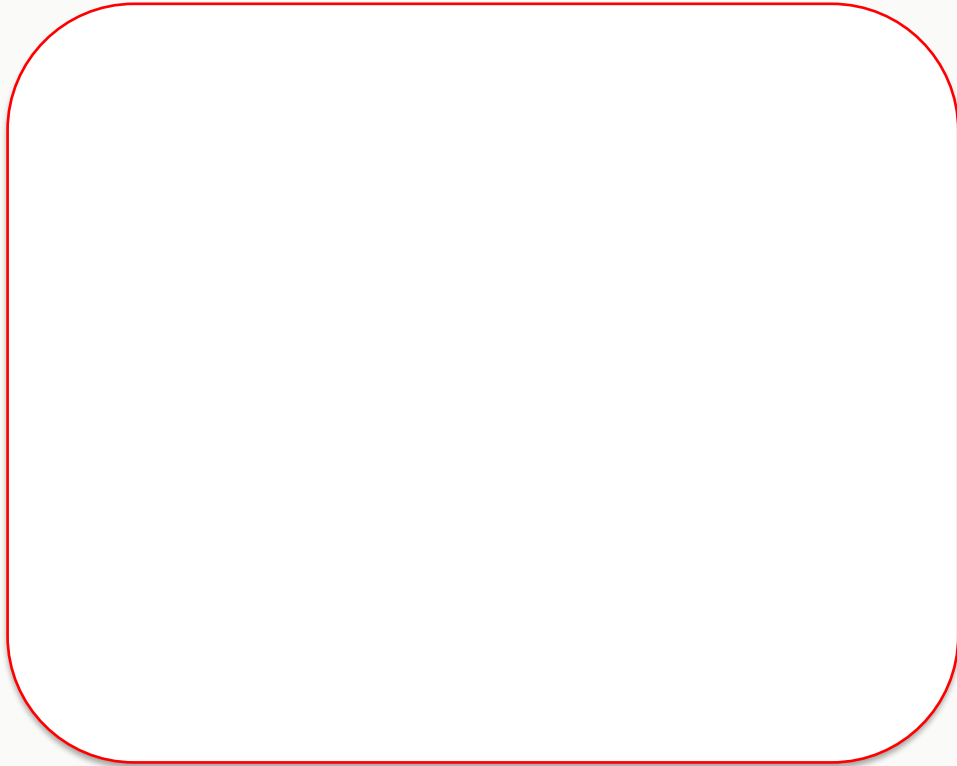
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# No shortage of the expectation

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*"The fight for trust is the battle that defines our political era" – Keir Starmer*

# This underpins a lot of the academic work

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**Citrin and Stoker (2018, p.61)**

“Interest in political trust rests largely on beliefs about its consequences for the effectiveness of government and democratic stability.”

**Dalton (2004, p.157)**

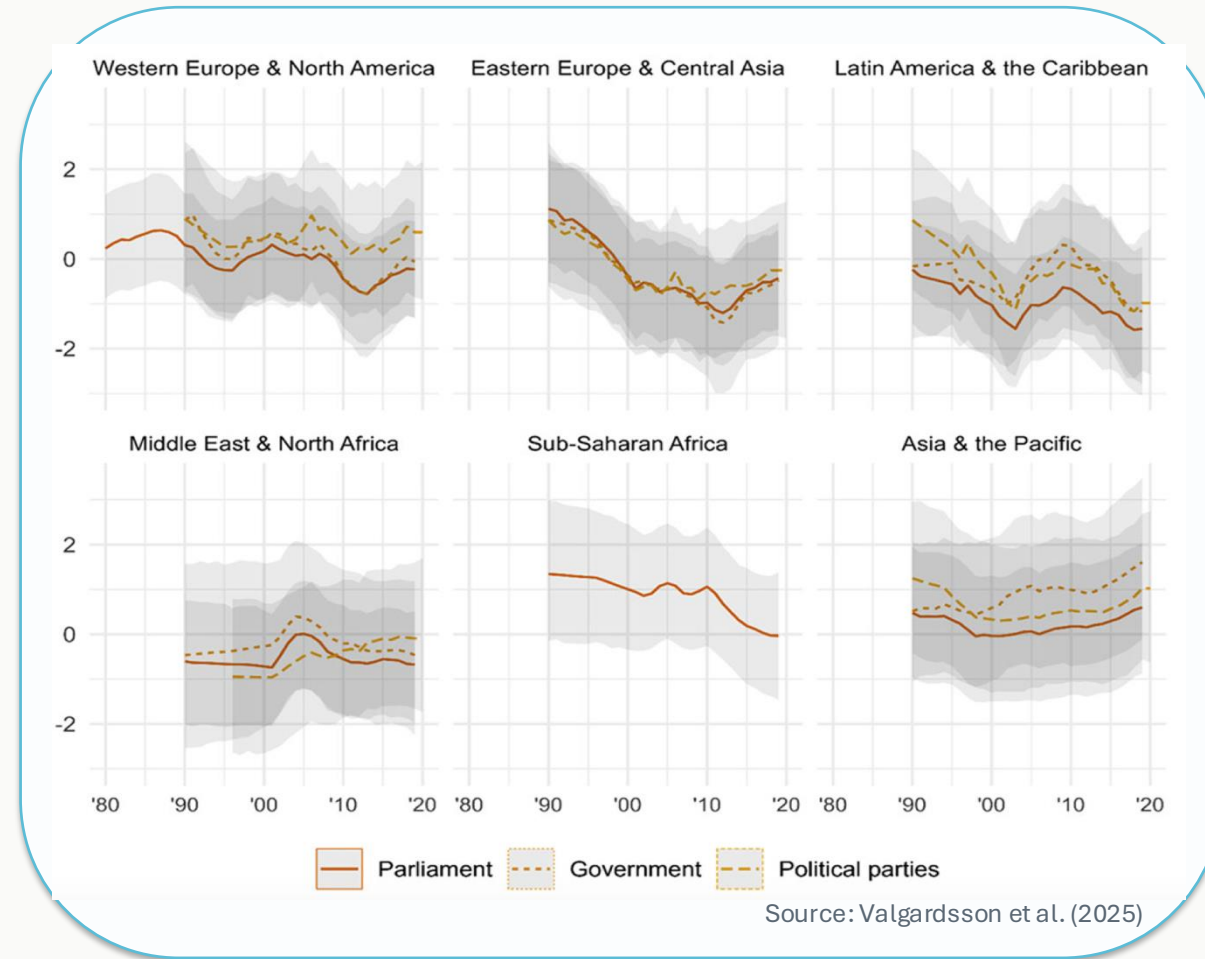
“There are legitimate reasons to worry that political distrust may erode the vitality of democracy, or eventually undermine the democratic process itself.”

**Linz and Stepan (1978, p.17)**

“The loss of support for all political actors in a democratic regime is likely to lead to an erosion of legitimacy.”

# And would be a problem given trends

Valgardsson et al. (2025) report a decline in trust in political institutions in several large, important democracies globally.

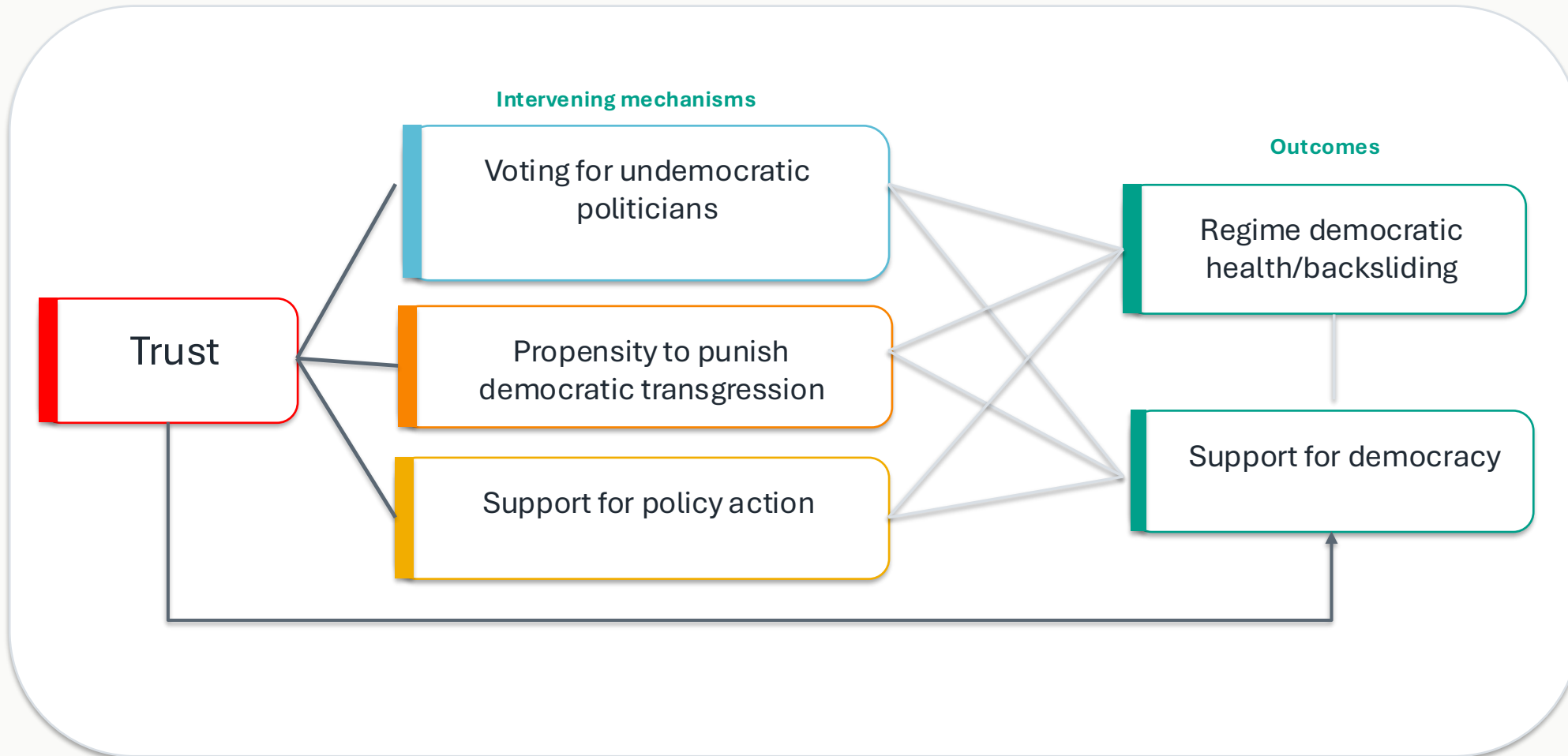


# This presentation

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- 01 Outlines four proposed pathways linking political trust and democratic outcomes
- 02 Highlights where the theoretical logic is thin or underspecified
- 03 Identifies empirical gaps or inconsistencies

# Potential theoretical pathways

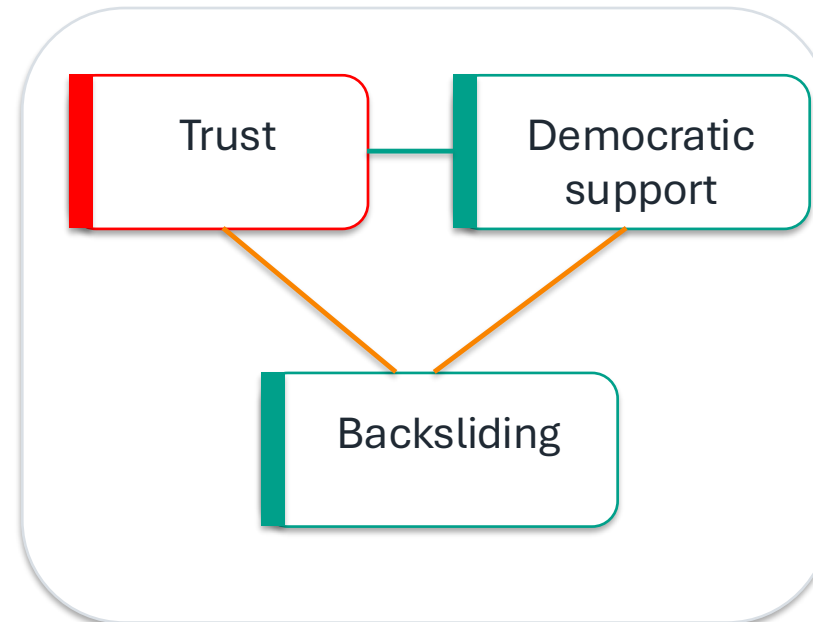


# Bolstering regime support

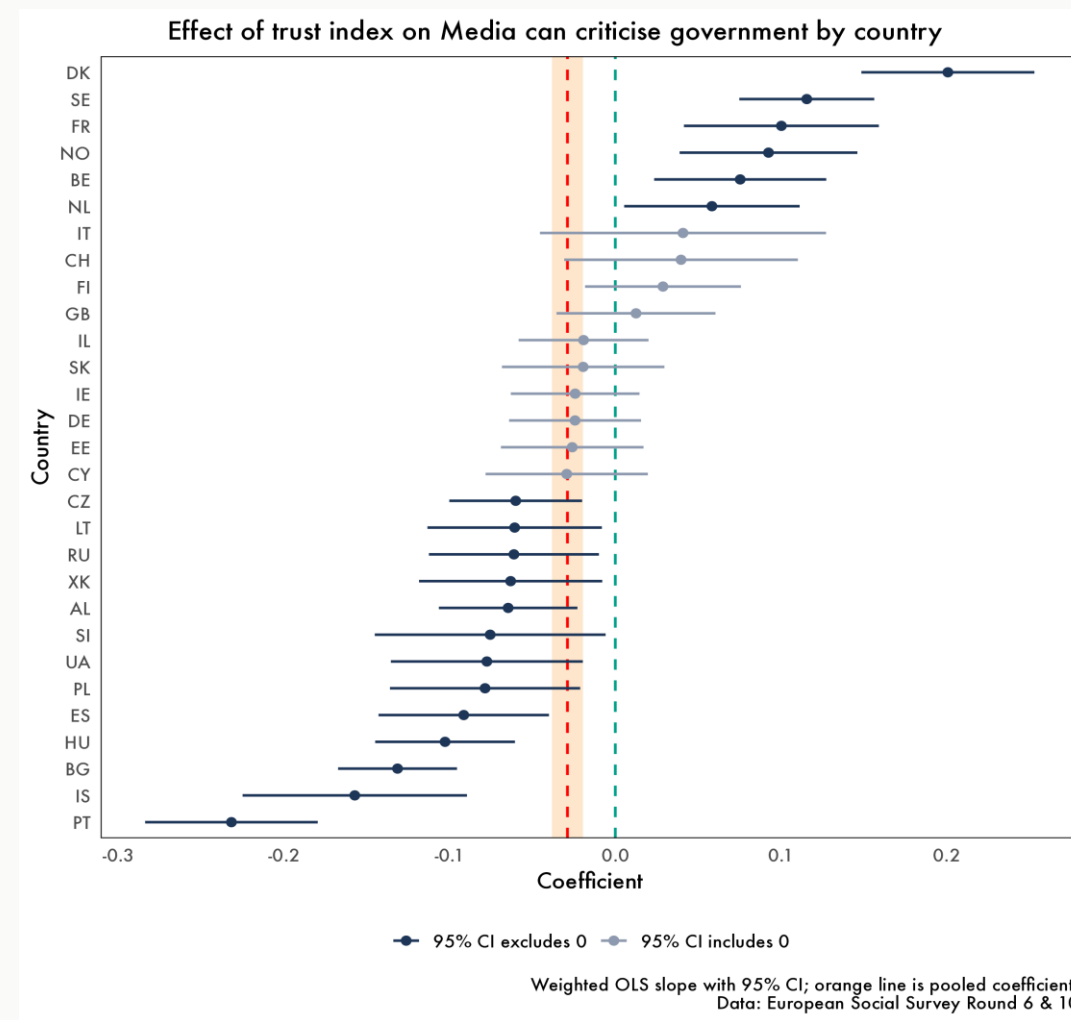
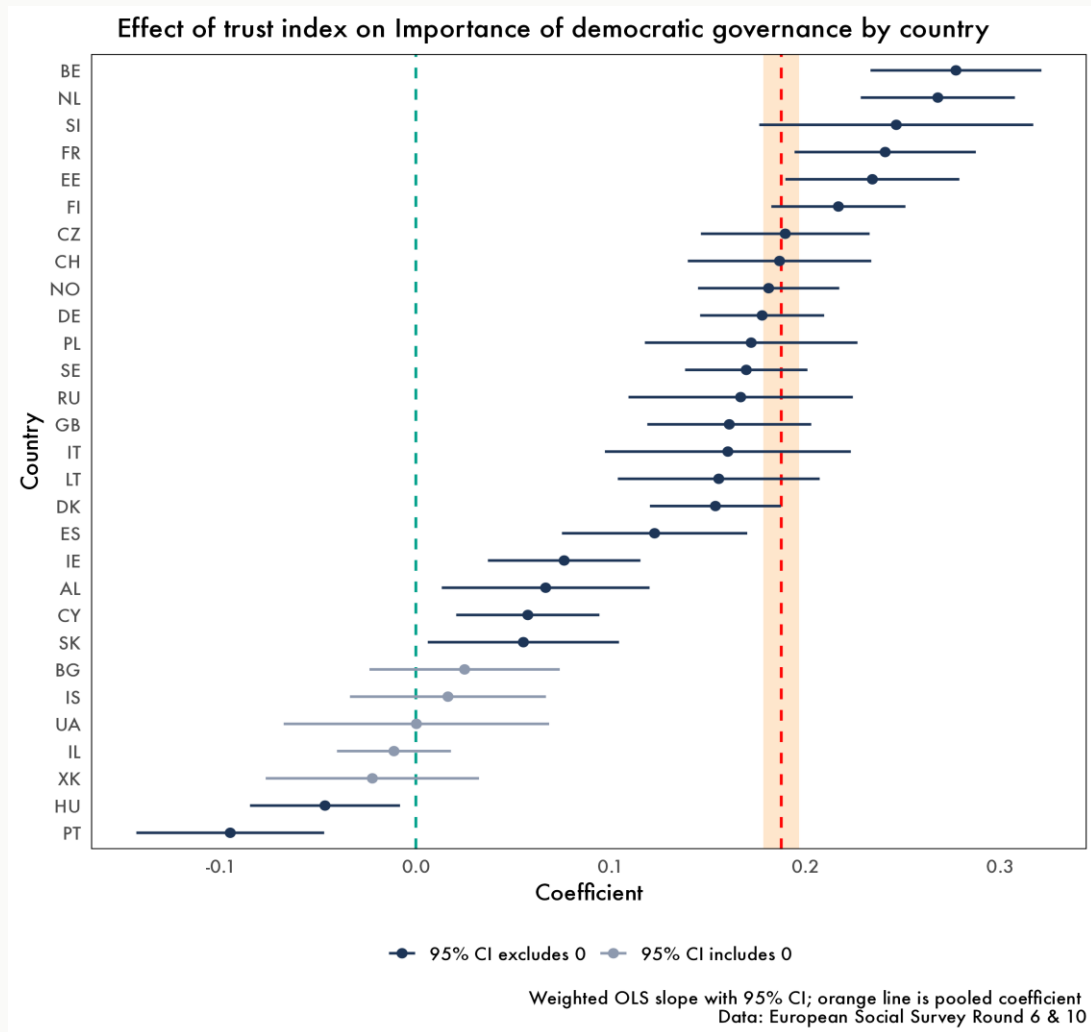
- **Does trust bolster support for democratic principles?**

- Evidence is mixed.
- Trust may reduce support for status quo democracy without increasing support for a specific alternative.

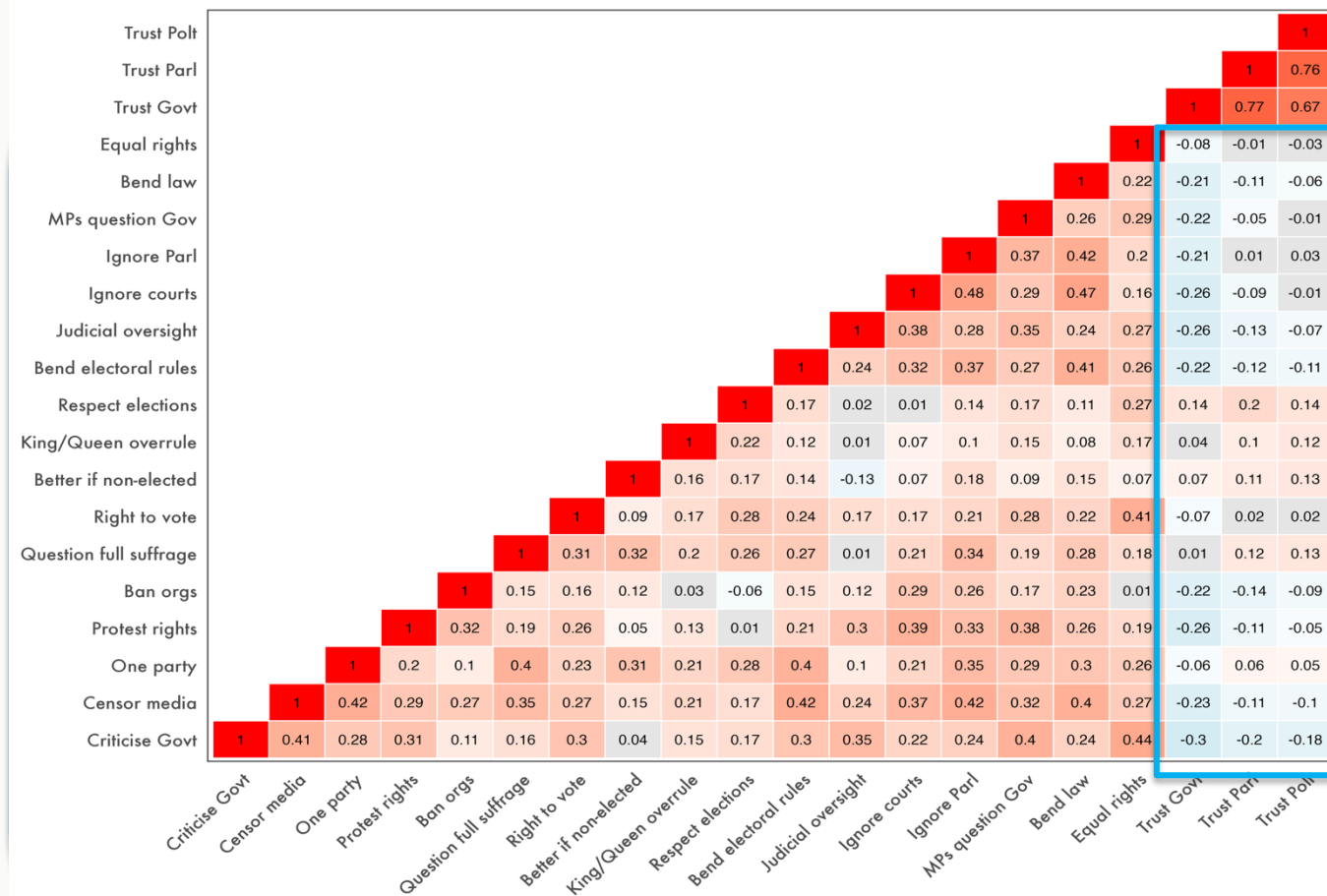
(Ouattara and van der Meer, 2023; van der Meer and Janssen, 2025; Kelly 2026)



# Trust is not clearly or consistently related to democratic support



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Data from Classen et al (2025)  
 'Conceptualizing and measuring support for democracy: A new approach',  
 Comparative Political Studies  
 Data: 2022, UK only

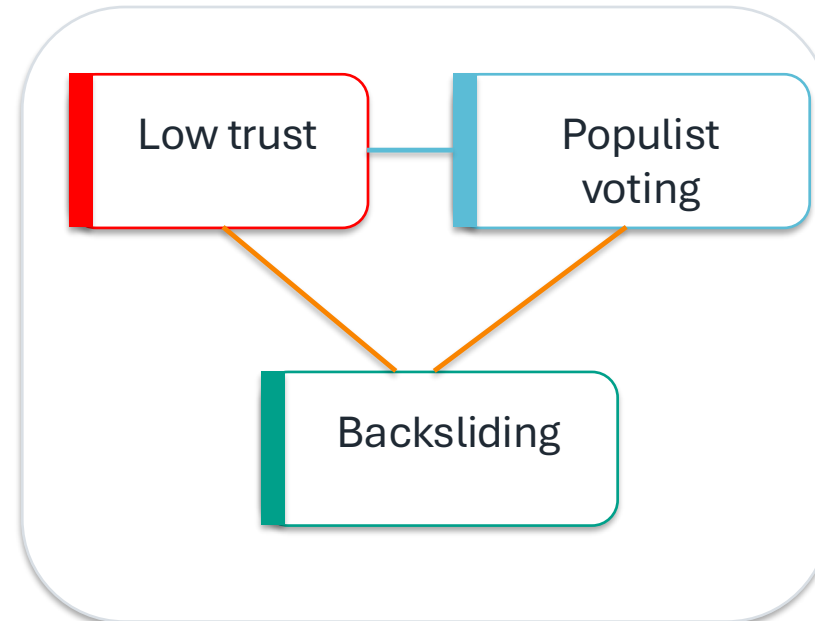
# Voting for (un)democratic politicians

- **Does trust influence propensity to vote for undemocratic politicians?**

Evidence for this (Devine, 2024), but:

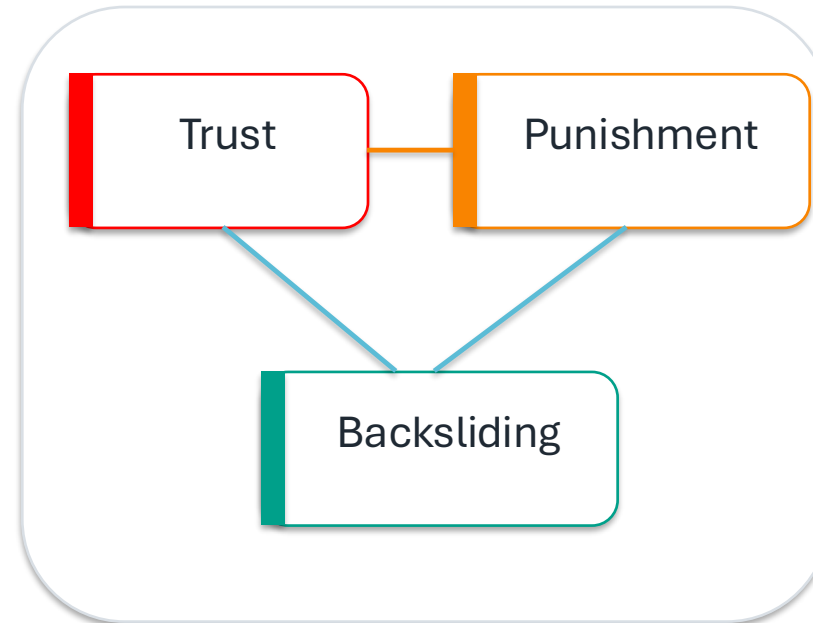
Less clear how this evolves over time

- Link between trust and populist voting dissipates when in govt (Rooduijn and Van Slageren, 2022)
- Populist voters' trust increases when backsliding accumulates (Palacios, 2025)



# Propensity to punish democratic transgression

- **When backsliding occurs, how does trust condition reactions to individual transgressions?**
- A large literature shows mixed or conditional sanctioning of transgression (Simonovits et al., 2022; Krishnarajan, 2023; Aarslew, 2023; Frederiksen, 2024)
- There is almost no work on trust specifically; one study finds no relationship (Claassen, 2026)
- Theory can plausibly point in either direction.

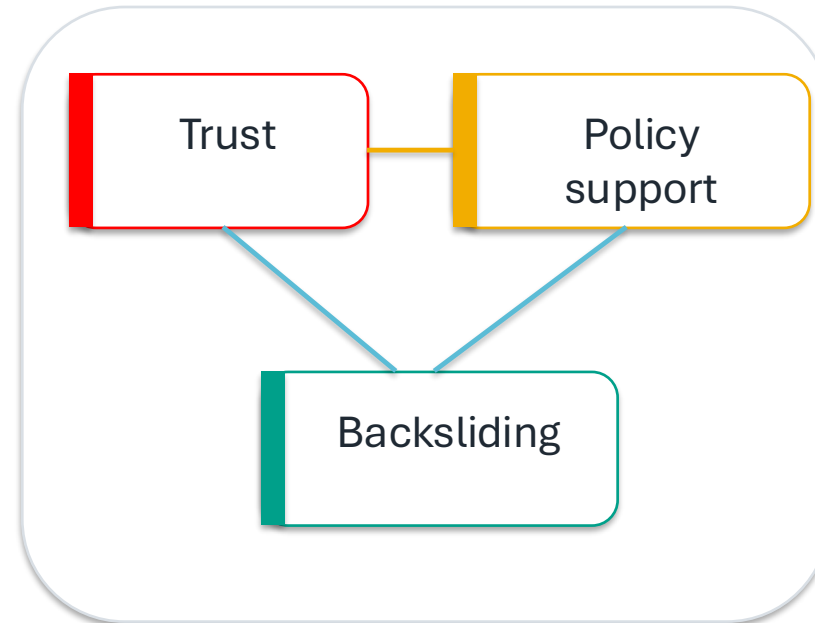


# Support for policy action

- **Does trust improve policy support and therefore democratic health?**

Basic argument: “If they trust government [...] they ought to be more likely to support more government involvement; if not, then less”  
(Hetherington and Husser, 2012)

- That logic does not by itself imply improved democratic health.
- Leads to conflicting and contradictory expectations (Fairbrother and Devine, 2026)



# So, what then? 'More research is needed'!

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## Theoretically

- Why would trust lead to specific outcomes?
- Does this vary by object and task of trust ('A trusts B to do X')?
- Does it depend on trust comparisons, including out-group distrust?

## Empirically

- More research on the democratic consequences of trust and its mechanisms.
- More research accounting for time.
- A wider variety of research designs.

CLOSING

# Thanks!

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## Thank you

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