



How does the Meaning of Political Distrust evolve?

Evidence from the UK

ERI BERTSOU

UNIVERSITY OF ST. GALLEN

12-13 MARCH 2025

AARAUER DEMOKRATIETAGE

Political Trust: Crisis and Empirical trends

- Trust trends vary by *institution, country, period*; but **trust in representative institutions** has generally declined in recent decades (Valgarðsson et al. 2025)
- In many democracies public debate increasingly framed around “rebuilding trust” and how distrust challenges liberal democracy
- UK Parliament POST Briefing (2025): share with **“low to no trust” in MPs rose from 54% (2014) to 76% (2024)** in BES data.

→ we need to be precise about what kind of distrust we are observing.

Table 2: Methods for measuring trust in different research projects

Project	Description	Method	Evaluation
British Election Study	Repeated survey of a representative sample of 30,000 participants across the UK, with 29 waves conducted since 2014. ⁷¹	Survey question: On a scale of 1 to 7, “How much would you expect each of the following political parties to do a good job or a bad job if they are in government after the General Election (either by themselves or as part of a coalition)?”	Uses perceptions of competence as a proxy for trust. Looks at trust in governing parties, not trust in Parliament. ⁵²
British Social Attitudes Survey	Repeated national survey run annually since 1983. ⁷² The 2023 wave had 5,578 respondents. ⁷³ Sample is weighted to be representative. ⁷³	Survey questions: “How much do you trust British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party?” “How much do you trust politicians of any party in Britain to tell the truth when they are in a tight corner?” ⁷⁴	Asks about trust in government and in politicians as a group, not trust in Parliament. Links trust in politicians to perceptions of honesty and integrity.
Democracy in the UK after Brexit Project, UCL Constitution Unit ⁷⁵	2021 survey of 6,432 participants and 2022 survey of 4,105 participants,	Survey question: “To what extent do you trust or distrust each of the following [political	Allows for comparison of trust levels between specific political institutions.

What trust (or distrust)?

- Many different conceptions, definitions and measures.
 - ▶ Hardin (1998, 2002); *encapsulated interest*
 - ▶ Levi & Stoker (2000); *contingent consent*
 - ▶ Uslaner (2002); *generalised civic disposition*
 - ▶ Van den Meer (2017); *running tally* of competence, integrity, benevolence and responsiveness
 - ▶ Jennings, Stoker & Devine (2024); from *trust* to *trustworthiness (BIC)*
- Moving from “Do people trust less?” or “Why do they trust less?” to “**What do they mean when they say they distrust?**” and “is this changing overtime”?

Three evaluative components of political distrust

Technical
incompetence

Moral failure

Interest
incongruence

- Based on qualitative interviewing carried out in the UK, IT and GR in 2013.
- Relates closely to understandings of political trust (BIC model) and of trust across other disciplines.

Data and Measures

► Items

Technical: When facing technically complex issues, Parliament will make competent decisions.

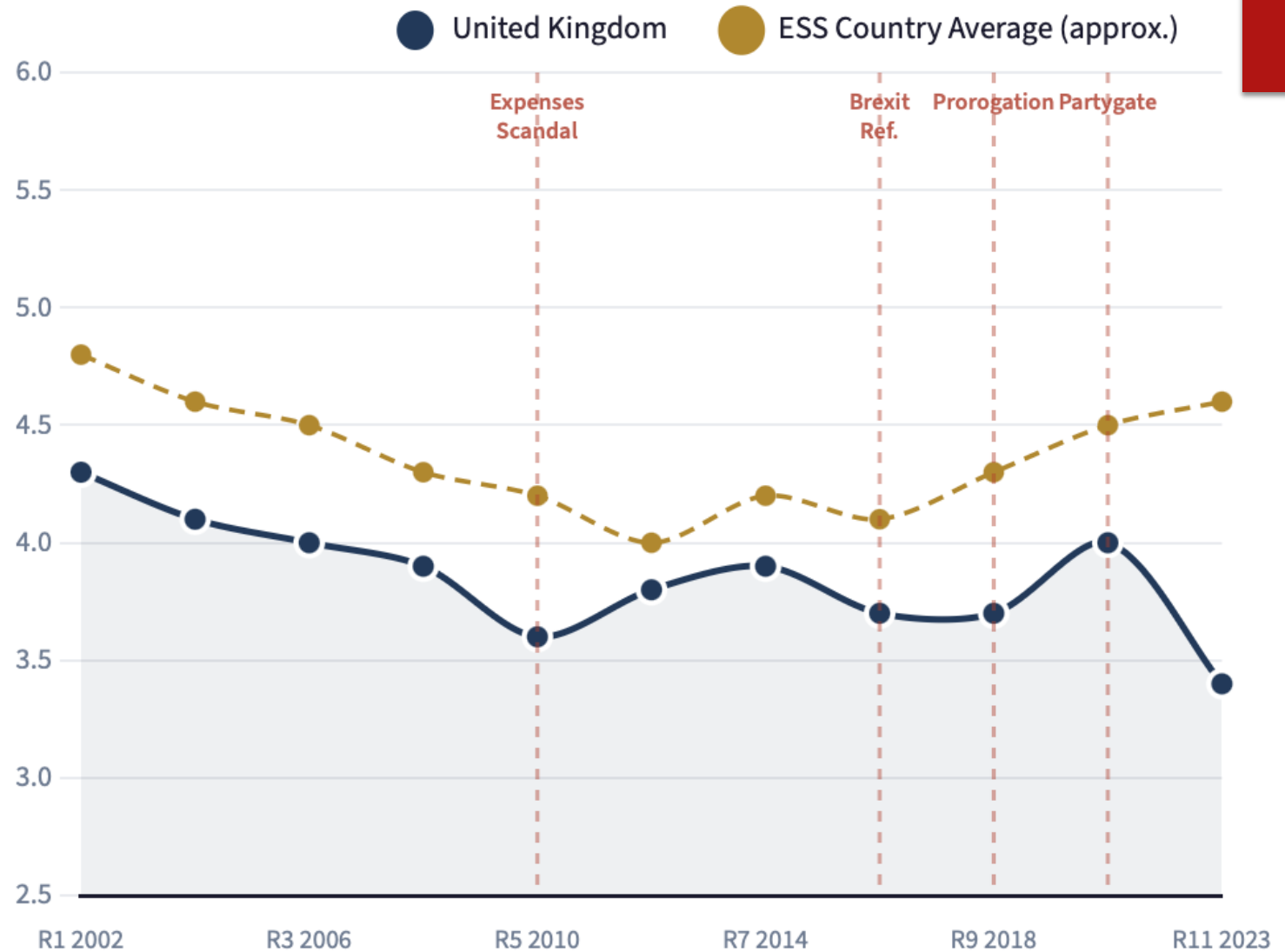
Moral: When facing morally difficult issues, Parliament will make the right decisions.

Congruent: On divisive issues, Parliament will act in line with my best interests.

- Likert scale 7-point agreement scale (recoded so higher = more distrust).
- 2017 survey included split sample positive/negative wording: no significant differences.

Year	N	Notes
2013	~800	Baseline study
2017	~1,000	Brexit aftermath
2025	~2,500	Polarized context

The UK Case



Source: European Social Survey (ESS), Rounds 1–11. UK trustprl mean scores, post-stratification weights applied. ESS country average shown for reference. Note: ESS10 fieldwork in UK conducted 2020–22.

IRT Approach: Graded Response Model (GRM)

1. Items are ordinal, 7 categories
2. GRM models category thresholds + discrimination
3. Discrimination (“a”) tells us how strongly an item defines the latent trait

Probability of selecting category k or above

$$P(Y_j \geq k|\theta) = \frac{1}{1 + \exp[-a_j(\theta - b_{jk})]}$$

θ = latent political distrust

a_j = discrimination (slope of item response function)

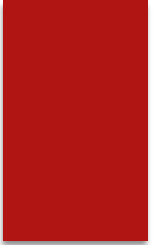
b_{jk} = thresholds (location of category transitions)

Samejima, F. (1969).

Looking at **a**

- Higher **a** → more sensitive to changes in latent trait
- Higher **a** → item provides more information
- Higher **a** → evaluation is more central to what “distrust” means

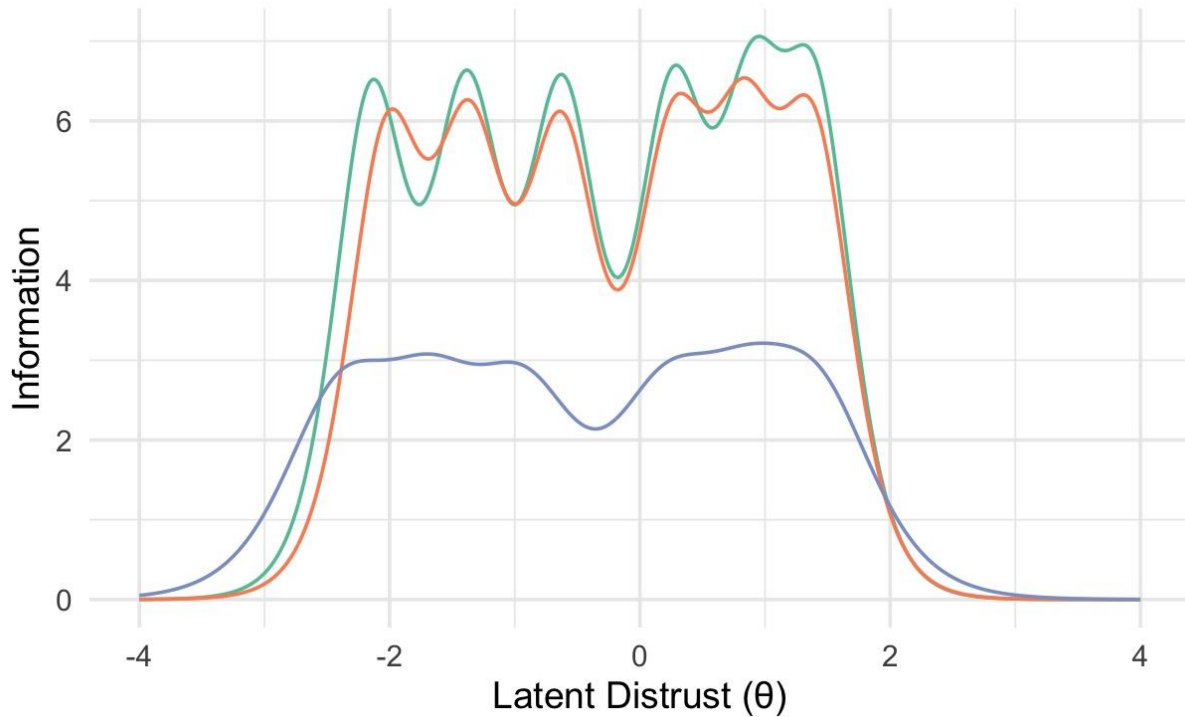
Results:
Discrimination
of three items
over time



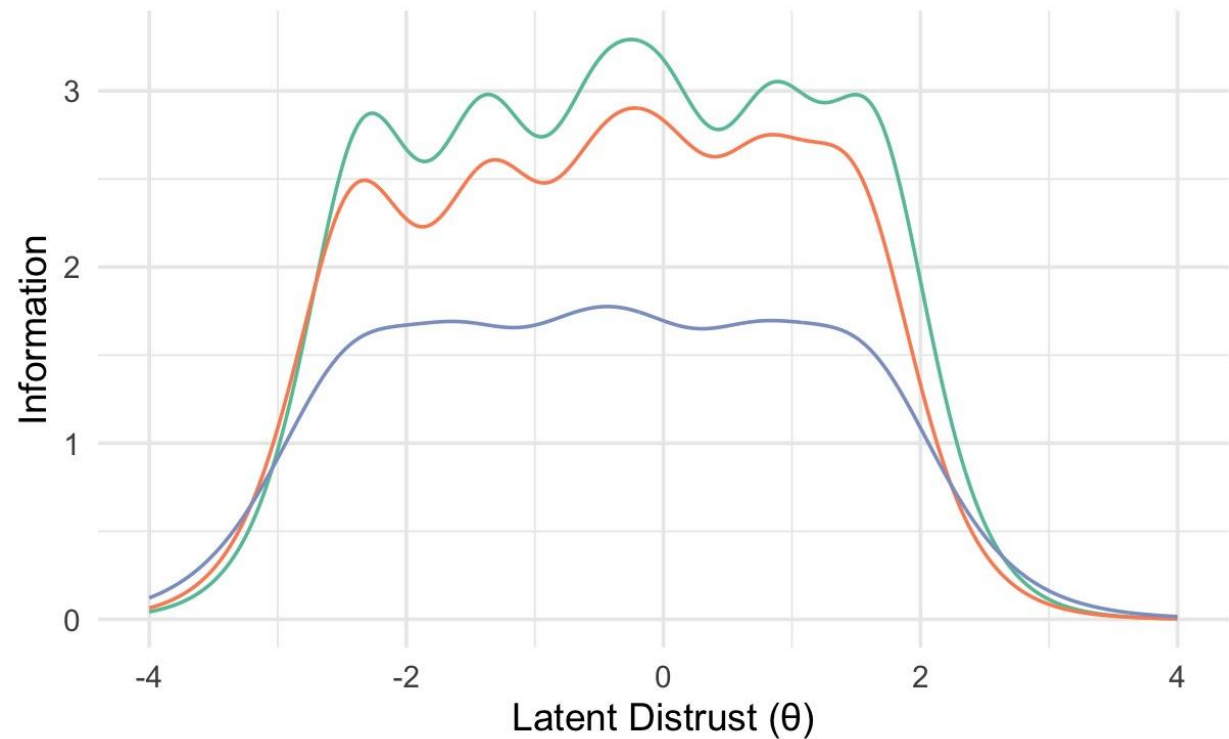
Year	Tech	Moral	Congruence
2013	5.05	4.86	3.28
2017	3.32	3.09	2.40
2025	3.18	4.22	3.23

Item Information Functions 2013- 2017

Item Information Functions – UK 2013

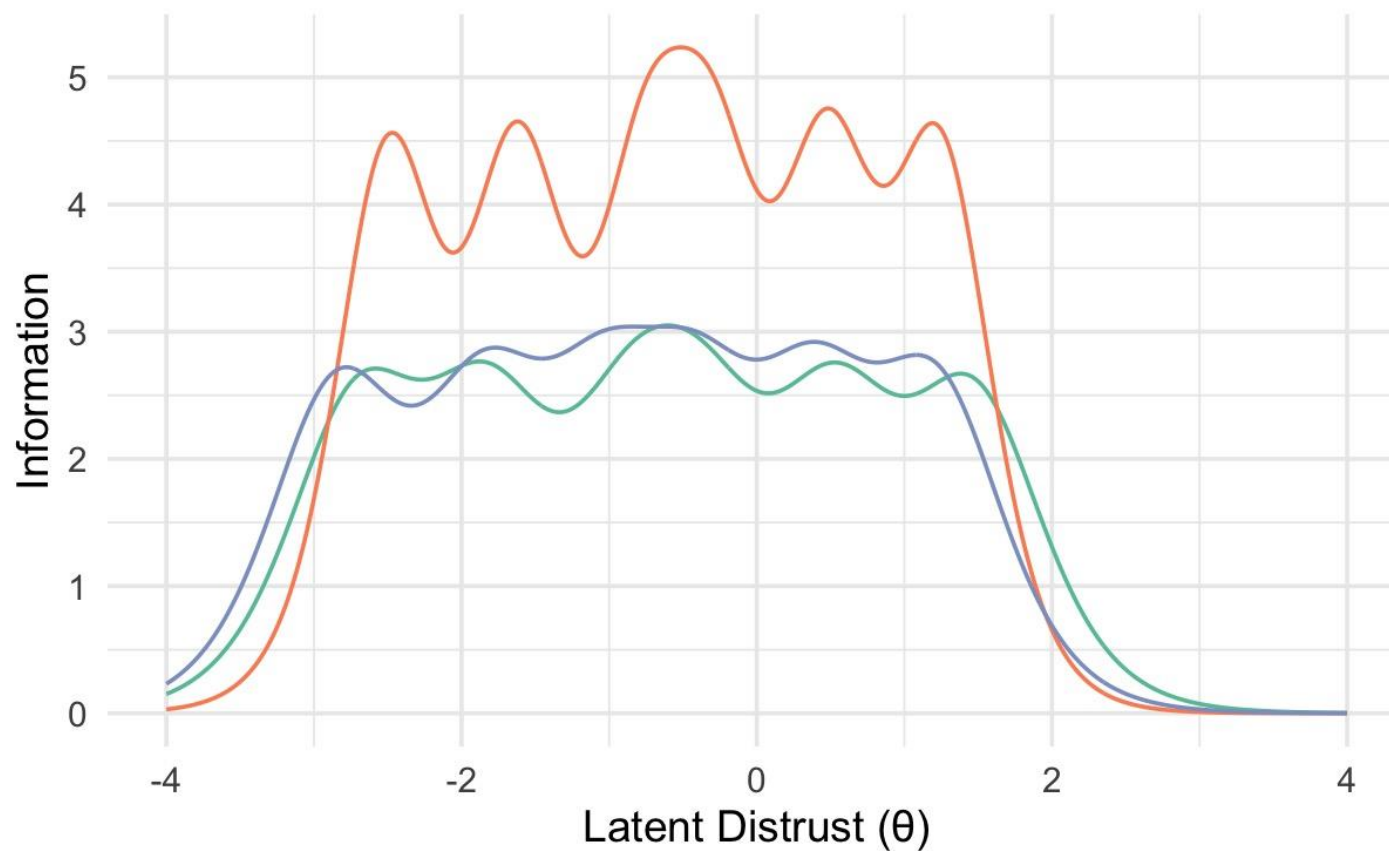


Item Information Functions – UK 2017



Item Information Functions 2025

Item Information Functions – UK 2025



Take-aways

- Distrust no longer rooted mainly in perceptions of incompetence.
- Moral evaluations have become key.
- Congruence evaluations in 2025 capture as much information as evaluations of technical competence.
- Directly linked to the appeal of populist rhetoric and growing polarization.
- Identity based evaluations are a harder form of distrust to reverse.

Conclusion

- ❑ Political distrust may be transforming in its meaning, even if trends remain the same or fluctuate.
- ❑ What people mean when they claim to distrust politics (esp. key political institutions) can be a key in understanding and addressing it.
- ❑ Evaluations of moral failings and incongruence signal deeper, more resistant forms of democratic dissatisfaction.
- ❑ Reversing political distrust? How to combat the rise of populism and polarization?

▶ Thank you