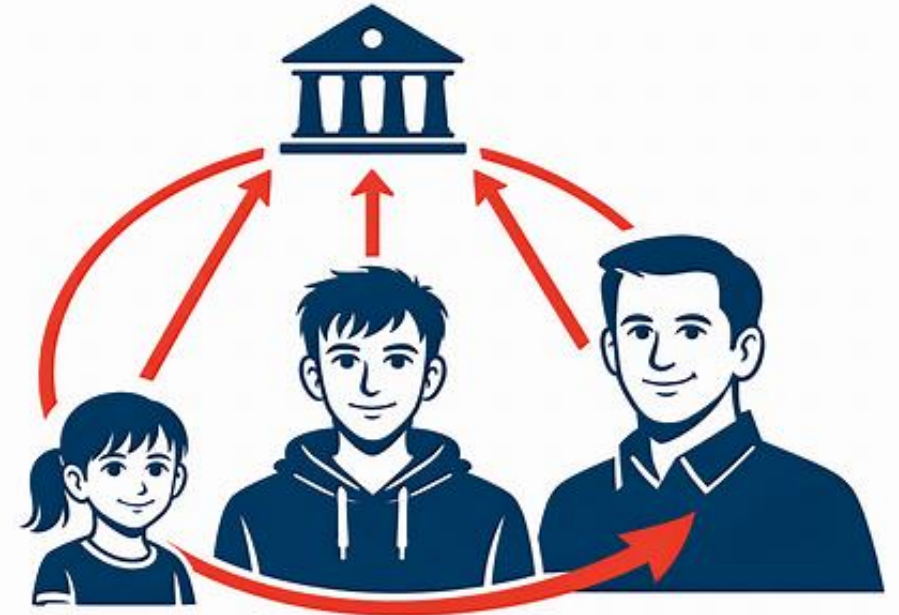


Trust Earned or Learned? Insights from Early and Late Adolescents and Their Parents



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Why Study Political Trust in Adolescence?

- Political trust is foundational for democratic legitimacy, fostering participation, cooperation and compliance (Easton, 1965)
- Adolescence is a formative period for political orientations, during which political trust is particularly malleable and consolidates into a (dispositional) trust baseline (La Roi, van Alebeek, van der Meer, 2025)
- Early developed (dis)trust shapes long-term political engagement (Smets & Neundorf, 2017; van Alebeek, van der meer, & Hakhverdian, 2025)

How does trust emerge?

The Nature of Political Trust

Trust-as-evaluation	Trust-as-socialization
Critical assessments of institutional performance and outputs	Socio-cultural orientation formed through early-life experiences
A trusts B to do X Context-dependent	A (dis)trusts B is (un)trustworthy
Variable	Stable
Trust = earned	Trust = learned

The Puzzle

Prior research

- **Adults: Trust is shaped by performance evaluations** (Mishler & Rose, 2001; van der Meer, 2011)
- **Adolescents: Trust is shaped by interactions with parents, peers, and schools** (Marien, 2017; Stals & Ziemes, 2024)

The Puzzle

A dominant expectation is that political trust is primarily socially learned during one's formative years, and that only after accumulating formal education, individuals have gained the cognitive and political capacities to incorporate performance evaluations.

e.g., Mayne and Hakhverdian (2017, p.7) “any act of evaluation requires a capacity to obtain and make sense of information related to the object being evaluated.” These skills are the result of “schooling”. Hence, evaluative trust emerges “only later in life” (ibid., p. 9)

However, this assumption has not received empirical attention yet

Research question

What is the nature of political trust among adolescents and how does it compare to that among adults?

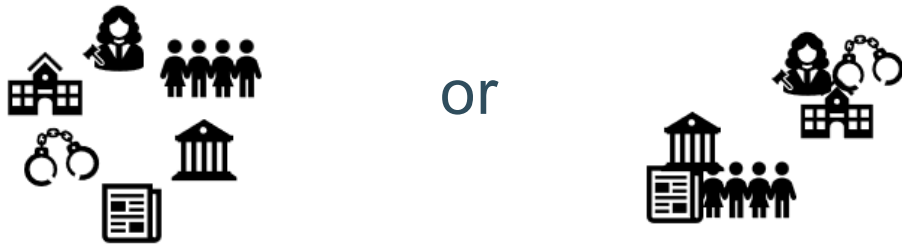
Two empirical approaches

1. The structure of trust

2. Drivers of trust levels

1. The Structure of Trust

- The level of differentiation in trust objects
 - Uni- versus two-dimensional
 - Hierarchical versus non-hierarchical



- Why is trust two-dimensional and hierarchical and when does this emerge?
(Breustedt, 2018)

2. Drivers of Trust Levels

Evaluation

Political knowledge, satisfaction with democracy and economy, and perceived corruption



Socialisation

Political trust of parents/children, talking with parents and peers, civic education, positive interactions with peers, fair treatment by teachers



Data

Data

Dutch Adolescent Panel on Democratic Values (2018-2024)

- The Netherlands
- Four waves (Age 12-16)
 - W1: 2,354 students
 - W2: 2,105 students
 - W3: 1,135 students
 - W4: 1,533 students
- Restricted sample (N=1,092)

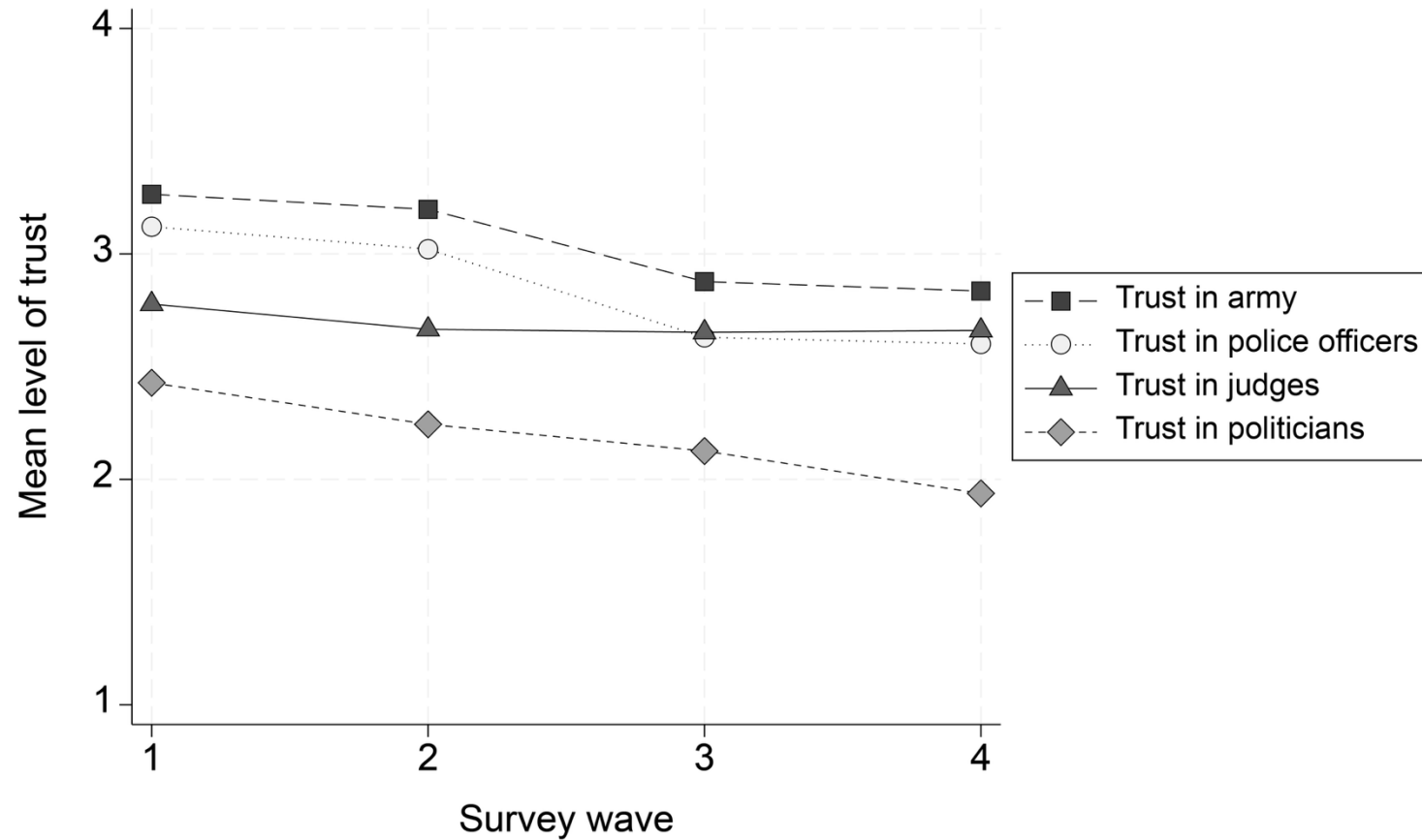
The Ghent' Study (2018)

- Belgium (Ghent)
- All Ghent adolescents aged 15-20 years old and one of their parents were invited to take part
- N = 2,347 adolescents
- N = 1,375 parents

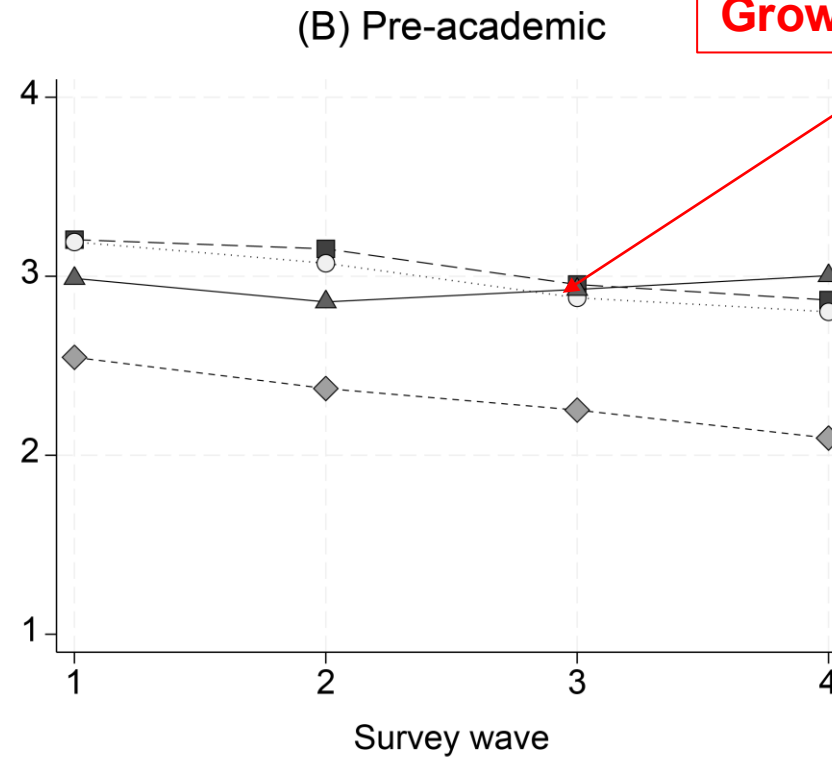
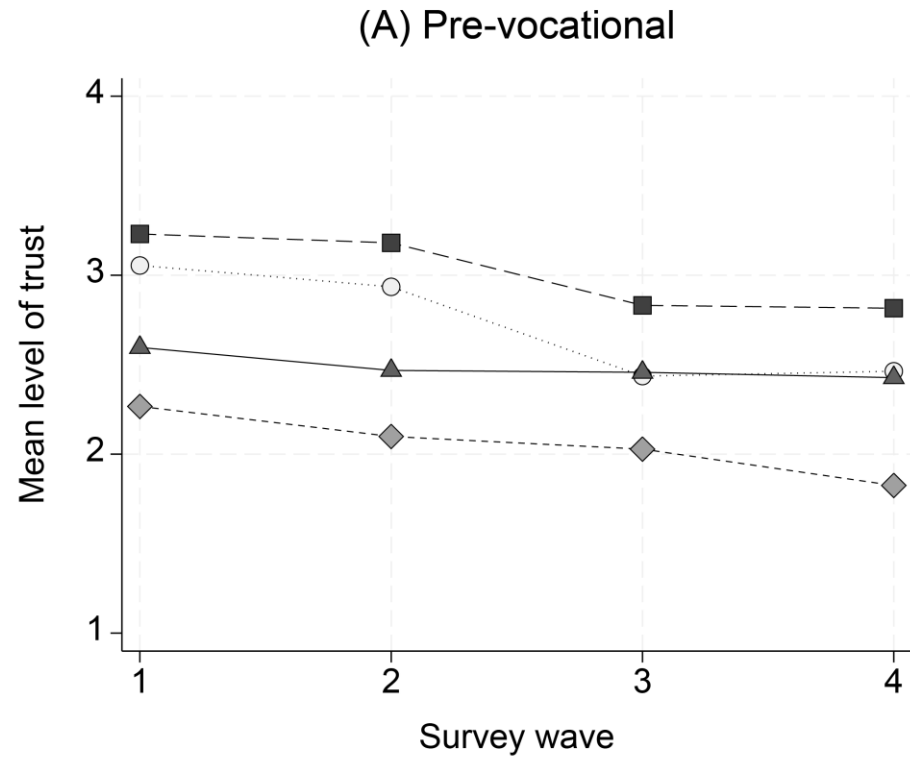
Results

Structure of Trust

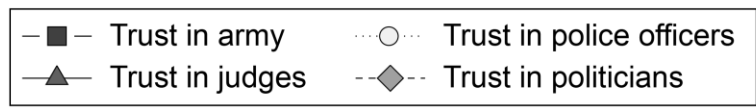
ADKS (The Netherlands)



ADKS



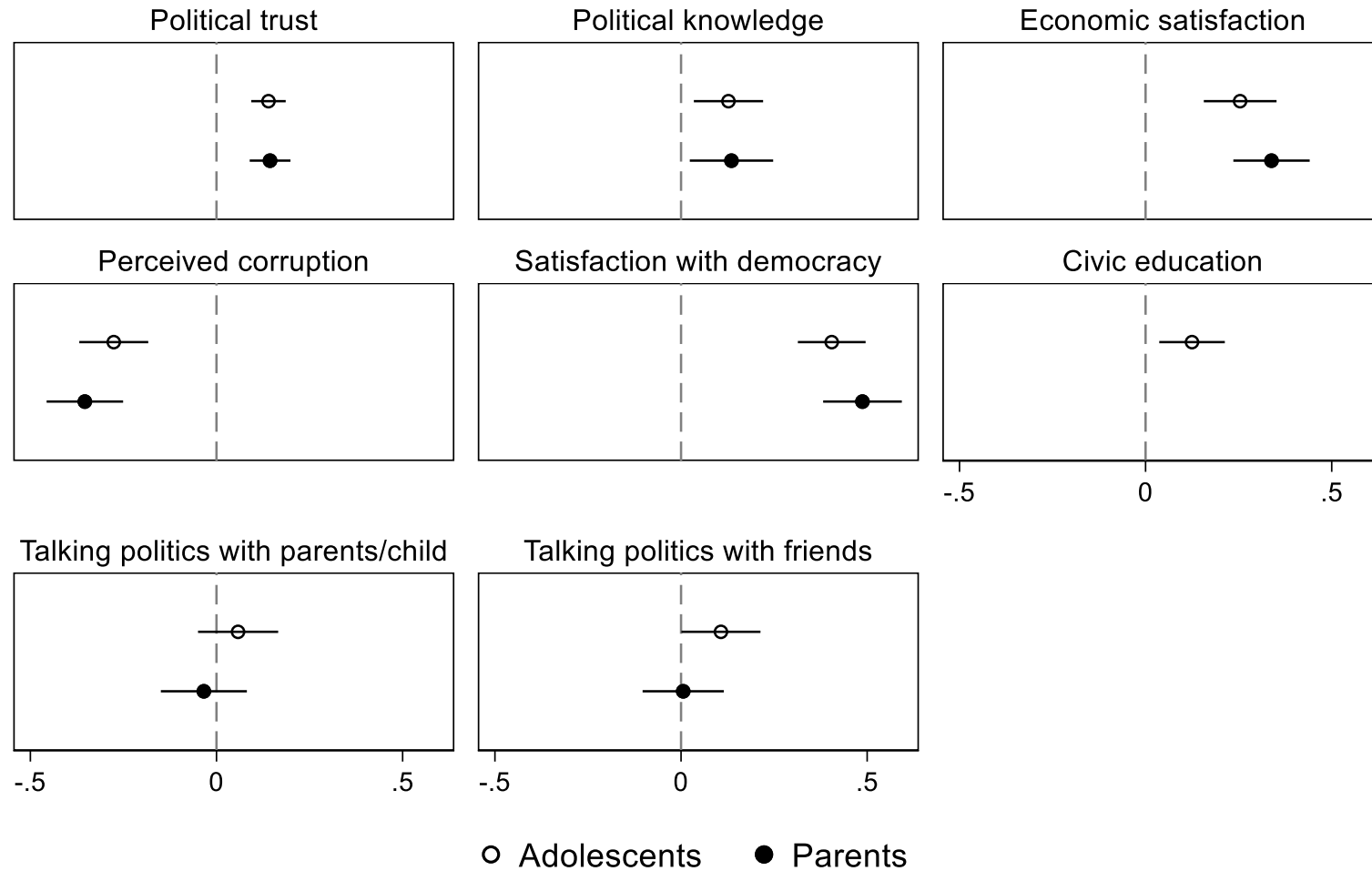
Growing deviation



Results

Drivers of Trust

Ghent Study



Conclusion

Conclusion

- Early existence and stability of a **socialized institutional trust blueprint**
 - **Growing variation and deviation during mid-to-late adolescence, particularly among high-cognitive resource groups**, suggesting the gradual onset of evaluative reasoning
- **Unequal trust is unequal accountability?**

Conclusion

Adolescents' trust is socialised, cognitive, and evaluative.

However, evaluative factors account for substantially more variation among parents. Hence, adolescents exhibit evaluative trust, yet evaluative reasoning seems to become more central once citizens have acquired formal opportunities for political participation.

Key take-away

Institutional trust is learned and earned during adolescence: its structure emerges early in life, and its underlying drivers (likely) evolve across the life course.

Thank you for listening! Questions?

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Extra slides



Measures Ghent Study

- *Political knowledge* is measured using a sum-score based on five questions. The battery includes a matching task in which respondents linked politicians to their respective parties, as well as multiple-choice questions about (1) the past municipal education aldermen, (2) the parties in the outgoing local government coalition, and (3) the structure of the federal parliament. Each correct answer contributes one point to the overall score, ranging from 0 (no correct answers) to 5 (all correct).
- *Economic satisfaction* is measured as a sum-score reflecting retrospective evaluations of the economy in Belgium and in Ghent over the past year. Responses range from perceived economic decline (1) to strong improvement (5). The two items are averaged to retain the original scale.
- *Perceived corruption* combines two assessments of corruption in Belgium and Ghent. The original four-point scale is maintained, with higher values indicating the belief that corruption is widespread (4) rather than rare (1).
- *Satisfaction with democracy* is measured as a sum-score of respondents' satisfaction with the state of democracy in "our country" and in Ghent, ranging from very dissatisfied with both levels (1) to very satisfied with both levels (5).

Measures Ghent Study

- *Frequency of political discussions*, two items measured how often adolescents or parents discussed political and social issues with their parents/children and friends, using a four-point scale ranging from “never” (1) to “often” (4).³
- Further, in the models for adolescents, we control for their parents’ levels of trust – and vice versa.
- Exposure to civic education is measured using four items assessing how much they learned during the current school year about (1) local election procedures, (2) federal election procedures, (3) how laws are introduced and amended in Belgium, and (4) how citizens’ rights are protected. Responses range from “nothing” (1) to “a lot” (4). A civic-education score is created by averaging these items, with higher values indicating greater exposure.

Robustness Ghent Study

- Are younger adolescents be less evaluative than their older peers? We replicated the full model per age group (15 years, 16 years, etc.) and found substantively similar patterns across the different groups in terms of effects directions and explained variances. However, low N's per model (about 200 adolescents per year)
- Are the evaluative effects simply an indication of indirection socialization? E.g. are adolescents more satisfied with the economy because their parents are positive about the economy too? To test this, we tested if adolescents' trust levels are additionally shaped by the reported satisfaction with the economy, democracy and perceived corruption of their parents. The coefficients for these indicators are insignificant. What matters for adolescents' trust are their own evaluations, not those of their parents. Interestingly, adolescents' evaluations are only weakly correlated with those of their parents (Pearson's r of around 0.2).