



POLITICAL TRUST IN CRISIS?

AN EXPERIMENTAL PANEL STUDY INTO THE
ORIGINS OF SUBJECTIVE PERCEPTIONS OF
STRUCTURALLY DECLINING POLITICAL TRUST

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The positivist responses

1. Is there a structural decline in political trust?
2. Does it matter to democracy, whether or not political trust is low or declining?

A more constructivist response

- *Describe* citizens' retrospective perceptions of political trust: do they *think* there is a decline in political trust?
- *Validate* citizens' retrospective assessments against their past levels of political trust: do these assessments align with the actual development of their level of political trust?
- *Explain* trend perceptions and incongruencies by explanations from political science, sociology, and psychology.

Hypotheses

H1a (Forgetfulness): The larger the time interval between the original and the retrospective assessment of political trust, the larger the incongruencies between the two.

H1b (Rosy Retrospection): The larger the time interval between the original and the retrospective assessment of political trust, the more people overestimate past levels of political trust.

H2 (Information Offset): Providing individuals with information on parliamentary and governmental composition offsets political trust incongruencies.

H3: Higher levels of political interest are associated with smaller incongruencies between the original and retrospective assessments of political trust.

H4a: Individuals who are not in support of the current government will overestimate past levels of political trust.

H4b: Individuals who have supported the past government overestimate past levels of political trust.

H4c: When citizens are provided with information on past government composition, the gap between past supporters and opposers becomes larger (i.e., past supporters are more likely to overestimate their level of trust while past opposers are more likely to underestimate their political trust).

H5a: Following negative life events, such as job loss, divorce, or the death of a close kin, individuals overestimate their past levels of political trust.

H5b: Following declines in income, individuals overestimate their past levels of political trust.

H6: Higher levels of neuroticism are associated with an overestimation of past levels of political trust.

Survey experiment

Embedded in the LISS-panel

- Trust measures since 2008
- Data collected in Spring 2025*
- 1882 respondents
 - Selection to overrepresent longtime participants
 - Mean age = 60.8 years

Design

- 2x2 Between-subjects factorial survey experiment fielded in the Dutch LISS panel
- One ordinal and one continuous treatment condition

		Political Information (binary)	
		Government composition	No information
Time horizon (continuous)	2008		
	2009		
	...		
	2022		
	2023		

Measures

Dependent Variables:

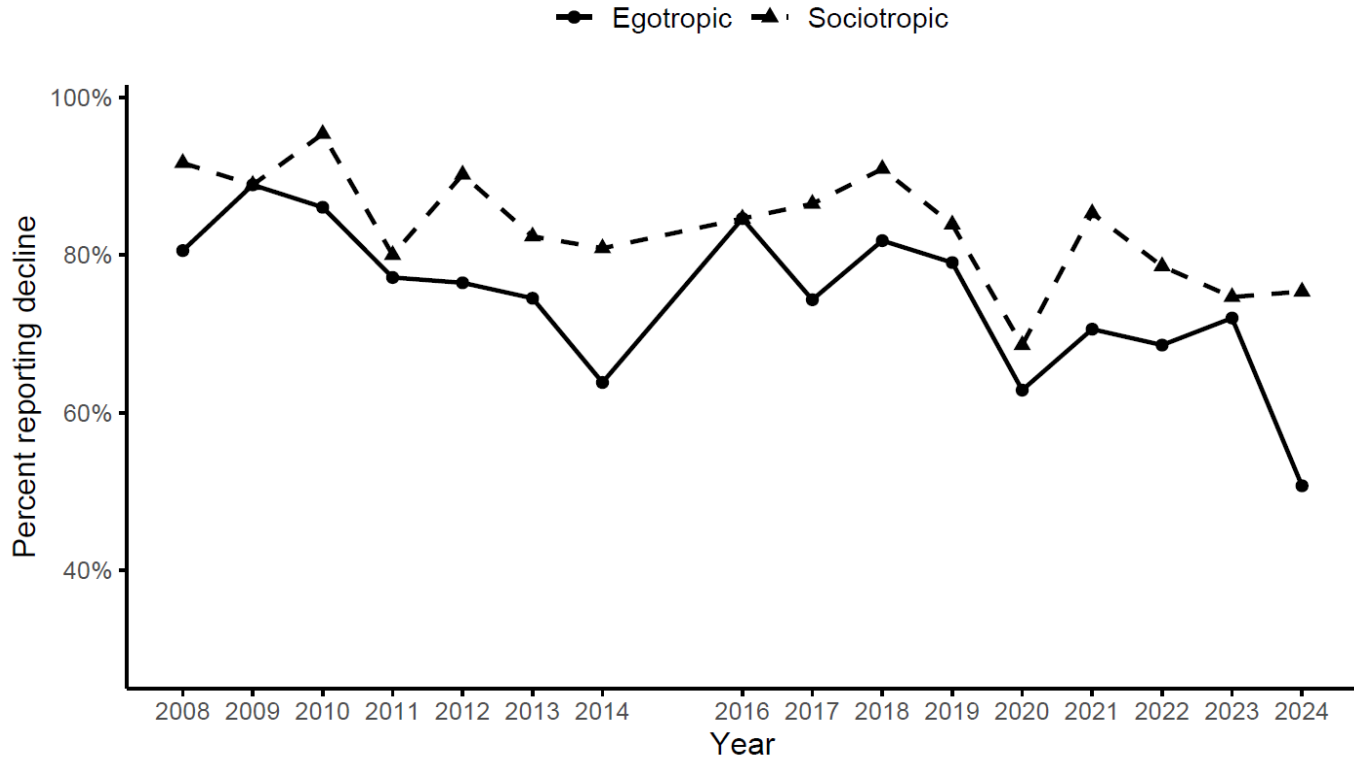
- Egotropic trust increase/decline (MC; 1= increased; 2 = declined; 3 = stayed the same)
Thinking back to [year], would you say your trust in the national government has increased, decreased, or stayed the same?
- Sociotropic trust increase/decline (1= declined a great deal; 7 = increased a great deal)
If you compare [year] with today, do you think trust in politics among Dutch citizens has increased or declined?
- Egotropic political trust (assessed before experiment; 1 = trust; 7 = distrust)
How much trust do you have in:
 - ... *the parliament of your country*
 - ... *the current government of your country*
- Egotropic trust incongruencies (1 = trust; 7 = distrust)
Think back to the year [year]. Back then, how much trust did you have in:
 - ... *the parliament of your country.*
 - ... *the government of your country.*

Actual vs perceived trend (egotropic)

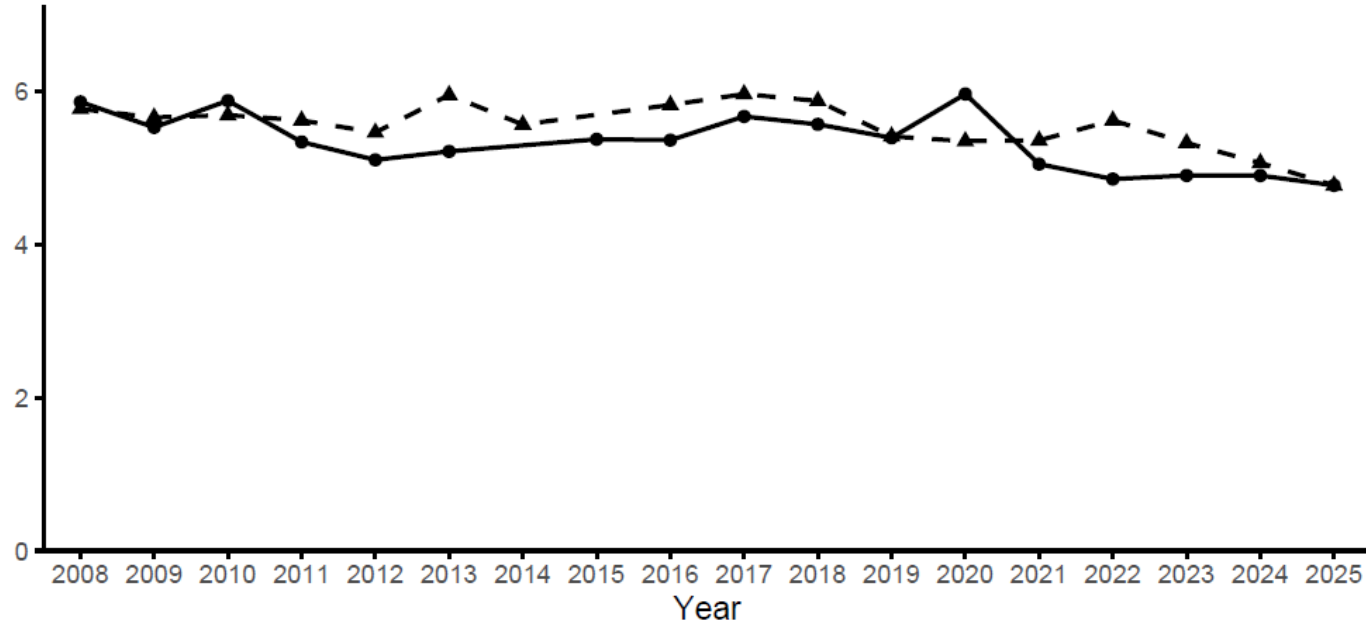
Perceived Trend	Actual Trend		
	Decline	Stable	Increase
Decline (“the past was better”)	51.02	11.79	11.79
Stable (“the past was the same”)	8.30	4.93	8.66
Increase (“the past was worse”)	0.84	0.00	2.65

Note. Values are percentages based on the sub-sample that did not receive the information treatment (n = 831). Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

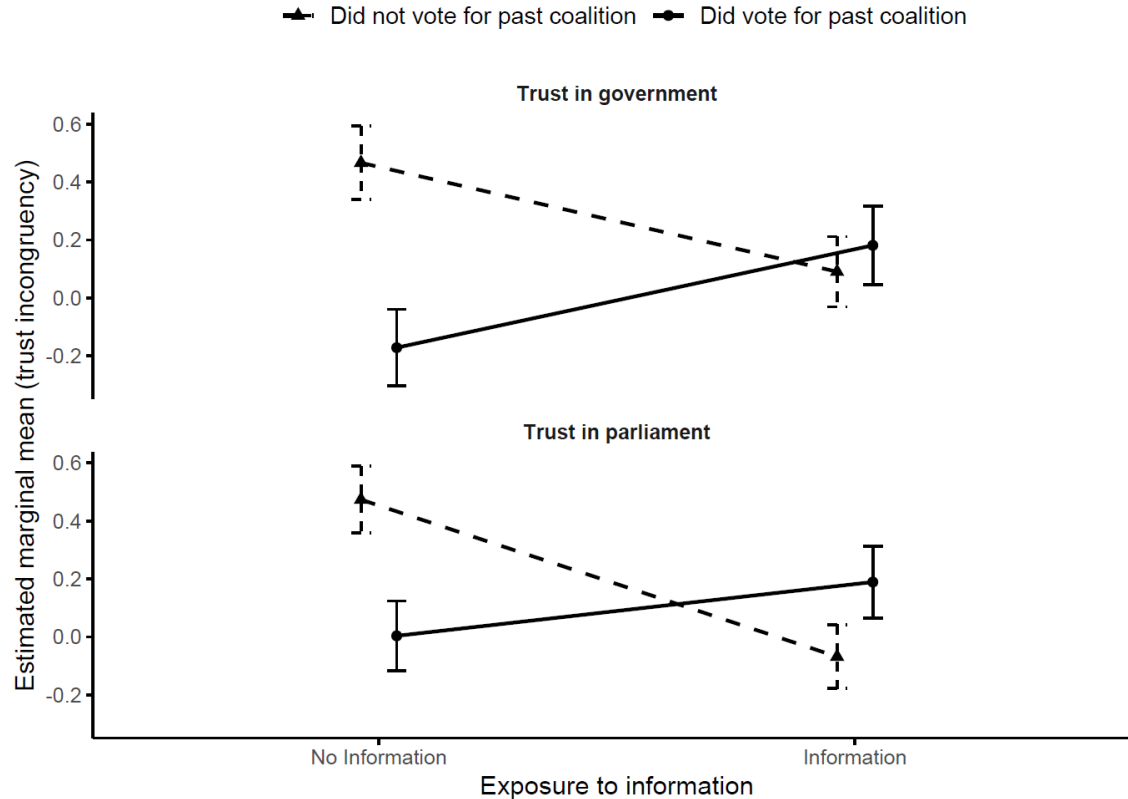
Percentage reporting decline, by year



Actual and perceived trust, by year



The role of partisanship, by year



Micro-level: decline perceptions

	DV: Egotropic Decline			DV: Sociotropic Decline		
	EM1: Golden Glow (H1b)	EM2: Partisanship (H4a/b)	EM3: Interaction with Info (H4c)	SM1: Golden Glow (H1b)	SM2: Partisanship (H4a/b)	SM3: Interaction with Info (H4c)
Experimental Conditions						
Years (experimental)	0.049*** (0.015)	0.058*** (0.017)	0.056** (0.017)	0.045** (0.017)	0.061** (0.021)	0.061** (0.021)
Information (experimental)	-0.207 (0.122)	-0.237 (0.146)	-0.624** (0.197)	-0.133 (0.143)	-0.273 (0.179)	-0.338 (0.228)
Political Science Perspective						
Voted for a Gov. Party in the Assigned Year (Historical Vote)		0.388* (0.153)	-0.081 (0.218)		0.553** (0.191)	0.459 (0.278)
Voted for a Government Party in 2024 (Incumbent Vote)		-0.445** (0.154)	-0.440** (0.155)		-0.167 (0.189)	-0.165 (0.189)
Information (Experimental) X Historical Vote			0.901** (0.301)			0.172 (0.372)

Micro-level: trust incongruencies

	Government			Parliament		
	GM1: Golden Glow (H1b)	GM2: Partisanship (H4a/b)	GM3: Interaction with Info (H4c)	PM1: Golden Glow (H1b)	PM2: Partisanship (H4a/b)	PM3: Interaction with Info (H4c)
Experimental Conditions						
Years (experimental)	-0.010 (0.014)	-0.014 (0.015)	-0.017 (0.015)	0.001 (0.012)	-0.002 (0.014)	-0.004 (0.014)
Information (experimental)	-0.068 (0.113)	-0.042 (0.128)	-0.376* (0.173)	-0.197 (0.104)	-0.209 (0.116)	-0.542*** (0.158)
Political Science Perspective						
Voted for a Gov. Party in the Assigned Year (Historical Vote)		-0.271* (0.132)	-0.638*** (0.184)		-0.103 (0.120)	-0.470** (0.168)
Voted for a Government Party in 2024 (Incumbent Vote)		0.209 (0.133)	0.213 (0.133)		0.121 (0.121)	0.123 (0.121)
Information (Experimental) X Historical Vote			0.728** (0.257)			0.727** (0.234)

Conclusions

Decline perceptions are pervasive in public opinion

- 74% (egotropic) to 83% (sociotropic)
- Dominant overestimation regardless of actual trend or time horizon.
- Not explained by sociological or psychological drivers.
Partisanship matters: historical winner-loser effects

Tentatively explains recurrent public and scholarly concern with trends in political trust, despite findings.

Important to test their consequences:

- Thomas theorem
- Party mobilization: politicization of nostalgia