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LEVERHULME  
TRUST \_\_\_\_\_

# Does political distrust drive democratic backsliding?

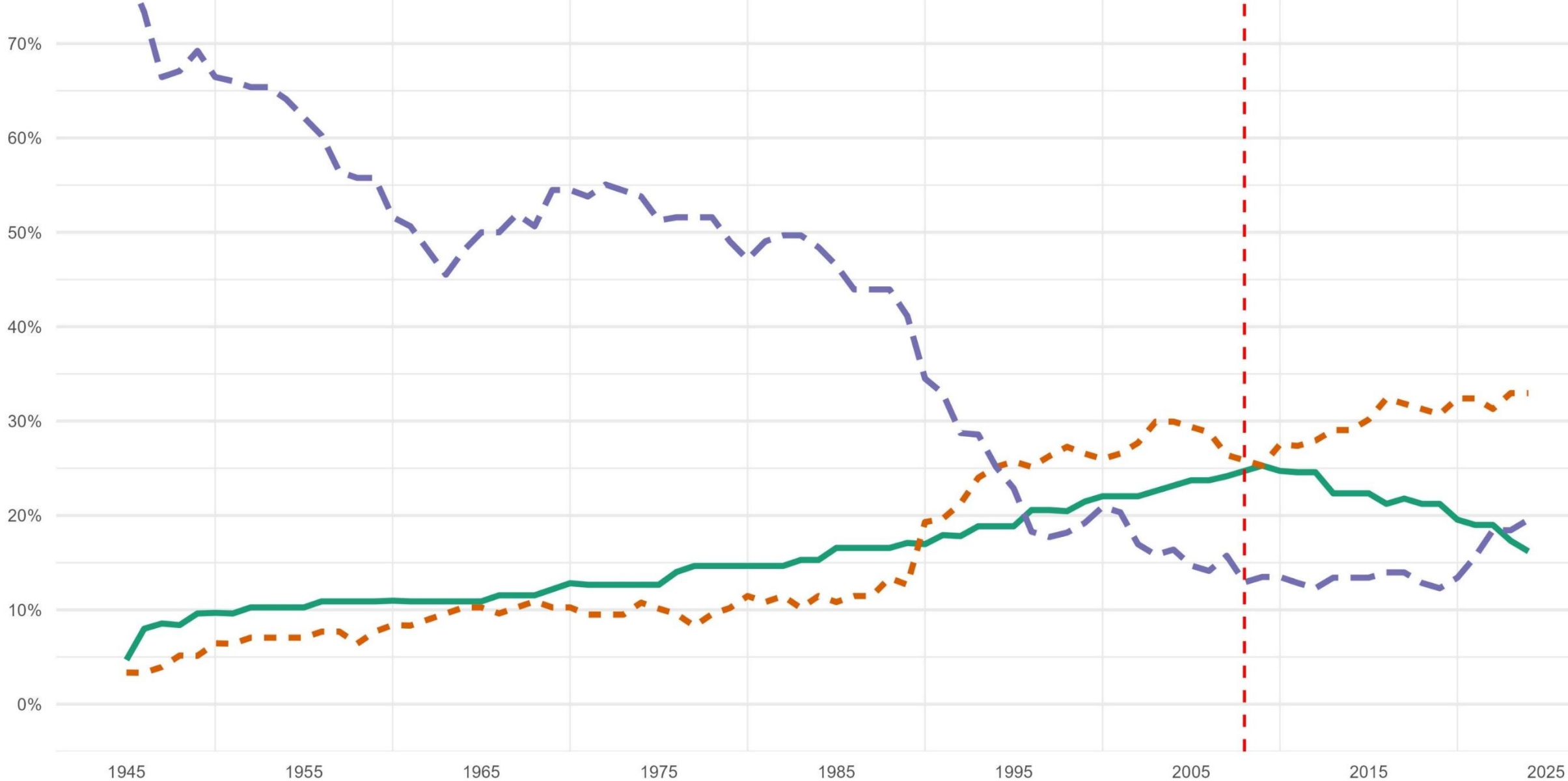
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**UNIVERSITY  
OF ICELAND**

# Democratic backsliding?

- V-Dem report in 2025:
  - The world has “fewer democracies (N=88) than autocracies (N=91) for the first time in over 20 years
  - Had been becoming less democratic on average since 2012, returning to the level of 1996
- Seems like it’s been getting worse since then?
  - Trump in the US, Karol Nawrocki (“Law and Justice” Party) in Poland...



— Liberal Democracies — Electoral Democracies — Autocracies

# What could explain this?

- Most academic explanations have been elite-centred:
  - Bartels (2023, 215): autocratic leaders have eroded democracy “simply because they could”
  - Elites dismantle liberal democratic governance through “**executive aggrandizement**” (Khaitan 2019; Bermeo 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Wilkin 2018)
- But how could they?
  - And I mean how **could they**?

# How could they?

- Why didn't they do it before?
  - What social and political conditions have allowed aspiring autocrats to enter government and erode democracy?
- Social contexts:
  - Economic crises, global pandemic, wars, mis/disinformation, inequality...
- But how do those changing contexts lead to elites eroding democracy?

# How could they?

- Two possibilities:
  - a) Less resistance to elites eroding democracy
  - b) Less democratic elites
- Both probably true... but why?
  - a) Resistance comes from institutions, the media **and the public**
  - b) The public more likely to support (less likely to oppose) less democratic politicians

# How could they (the public)?

- If the public is less willing to protect the status quo...
  - ... it stands to reason that they are probably less happy with it
- **Political trust** has long been considered an essential precondition for the stability of democratic regimes (Easton 1975; Miller 1974; Almond and Verba 1963)

# Why would it (trust... be needed)?

- Broadly: citizens' willingness to cooperate with the existing regime
- What does that mean?
  - Less likely to revolt
  - Less likely to vote for disrupting parties and politicians

# Why would it (trust... be needed)?

- Political trust as an active positive expectation of political actors to produce good outcomes
  - Gamson's (1968, 54): "the probability ... that the political system (or some part of it) will produce preferred outcomes even if left untended."
- **Distrust** as an active negative expectation of political actors
  - Not *the same* as lack of trust – but hardly compatible with trust
- More on this in our upcoming book with CUP!
  - *Trust in Crisis?*

# Why would distrust erode democracy?

- Distrusting citizens appear to be more likely to vote for and/or tolerate (aspiring) autocrats
  - (see e.g., Dyck et al., 2018; Rooduijn et al., 2016; Hooghe et al., 2009; Hooghe and Dassonneville, 2018)

# But why would... (you get the drift)?

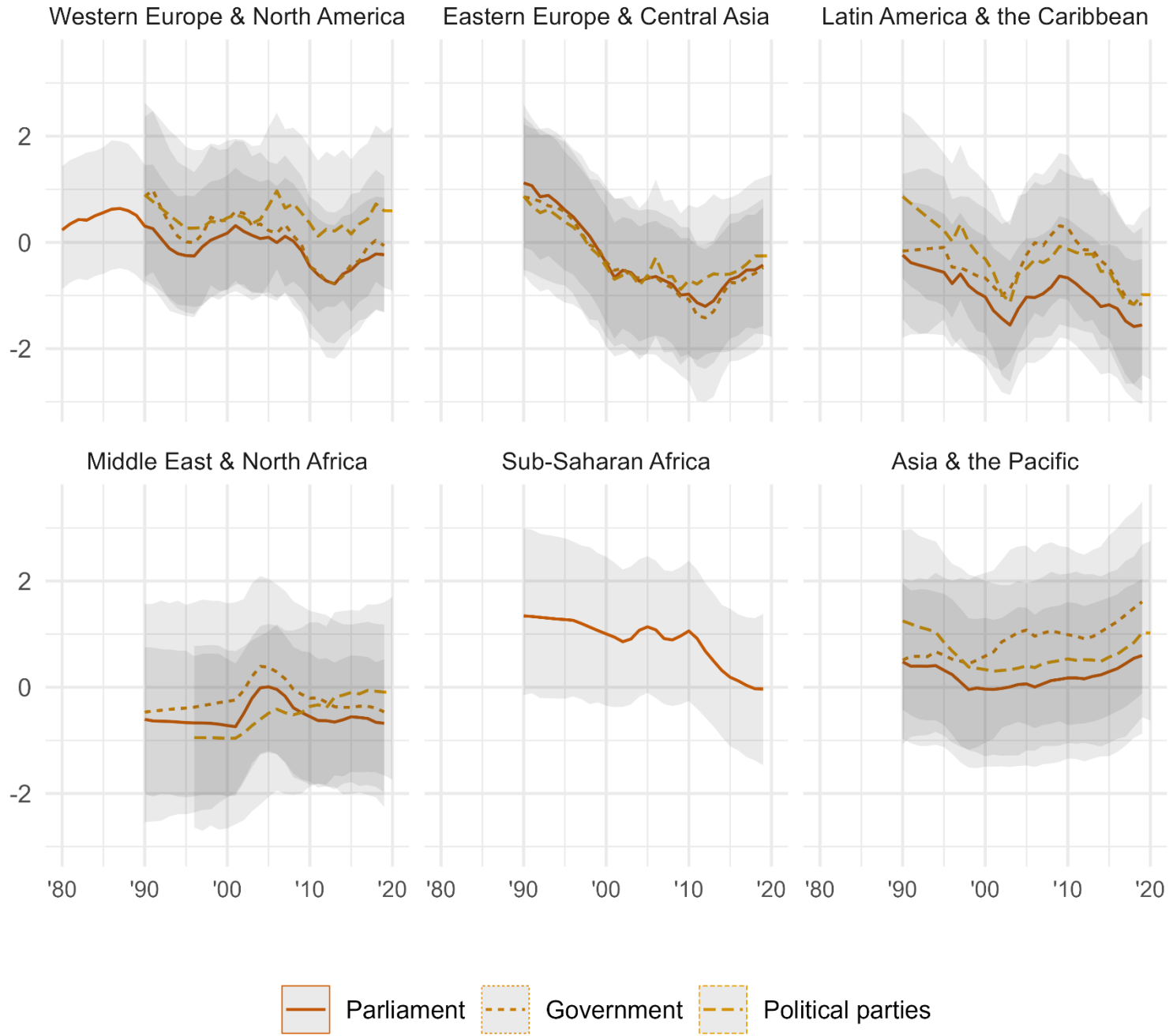
- Foa and Mounk (2017a; 2017b; 2016) argue that distrust leads people to be less supportive of democracy
  - But distrusters do not appear more supportive of autocracy when asked (Ouattara and van der Meer, 2023; van der Meer and Janssen, 2025)
  - Support for democratic principles has remained high across the globe, at least in the abstract (Claassen 2019; Wuttke et al. 2022)

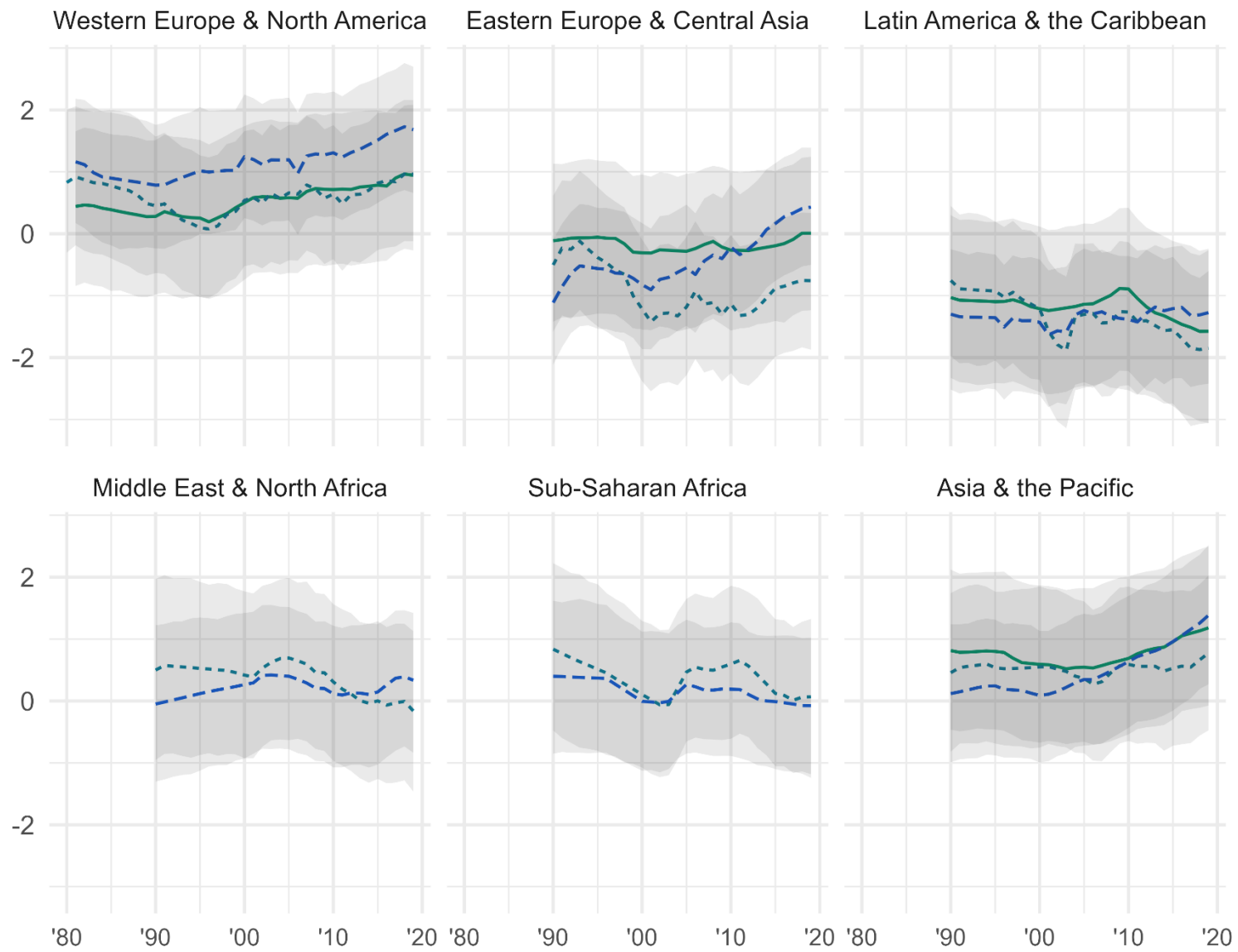
# But why would...?

- New, radical and challenger parties may be appealing to distrusters for other reasons
  - Outsiders
  - Rail against the establishment
  - Promise radical change
- Distrusters may not see autocrats as autocrats
  - Misinformation and motivated reasoning
- They might realize it but:
  - Think other politicians are undemocratic anyway
  - Care more about their grievances

# Is political distrust on the rise?

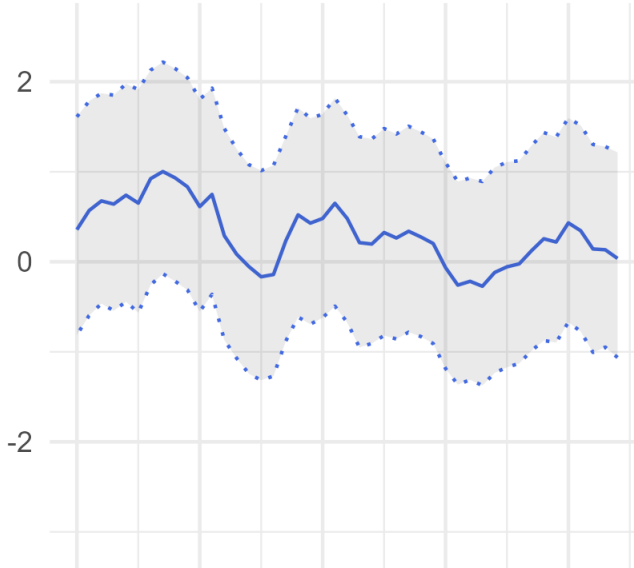
- Valgarðsson et al. (2025) use Bayesian analysis of data on trust in six institutions from 50 survey projects conducted in 143 countries:
  - “Among democratic countries of the world, there has been an underlying trend of declining trust in parliament by about 9 percentage points in the period from 1990 until 2019”
  - “... has been declining in about thirty-six democracies around the world, including large and geo-politically important countries such as Argentina, Australia, Brazil, France, Italy, South Korea, Spain, and the US”
- Not the same as rising distrust, but still...



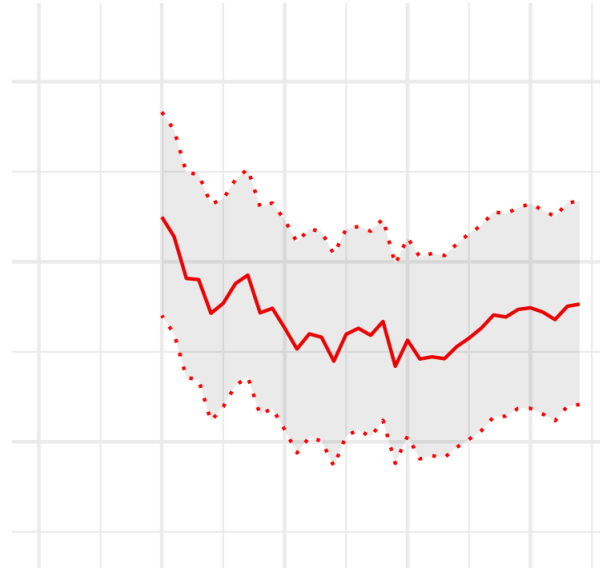


Civil service
  Legal system
  Police

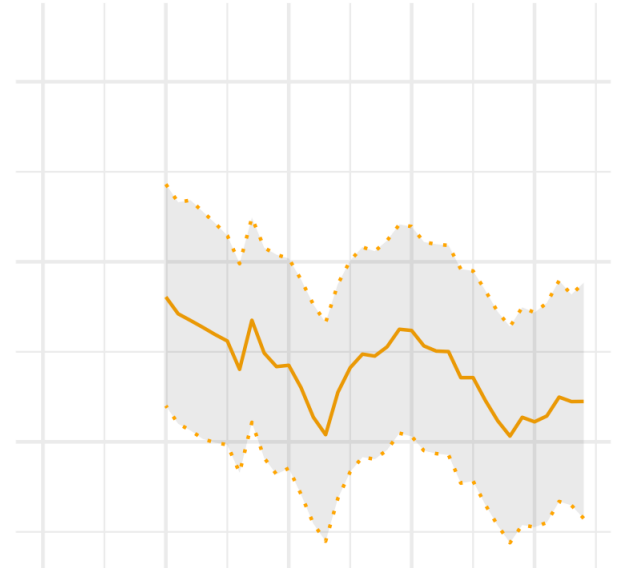
W-Europe & N-America



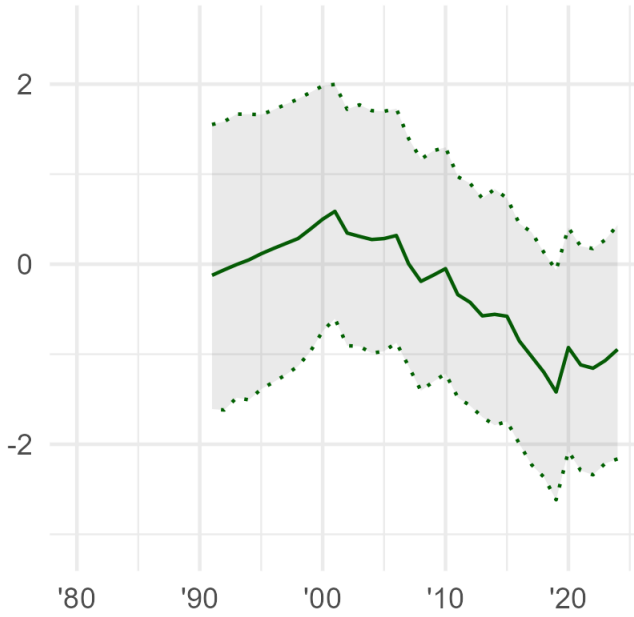
E-Europe & C-Asia



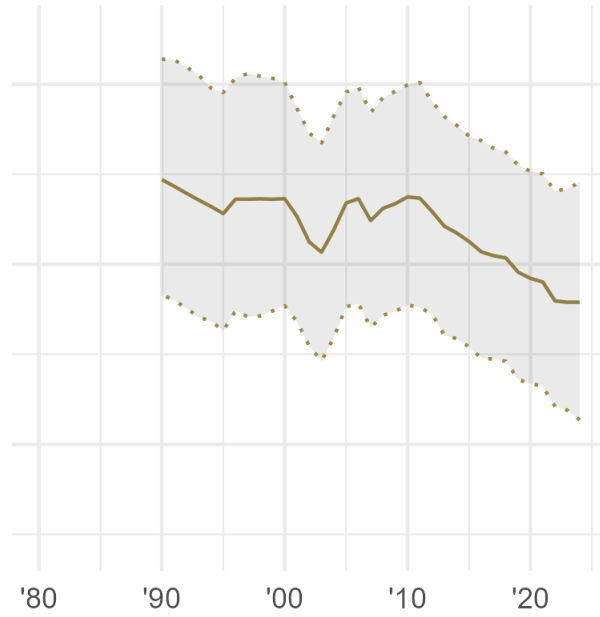
L-America & Caribbean



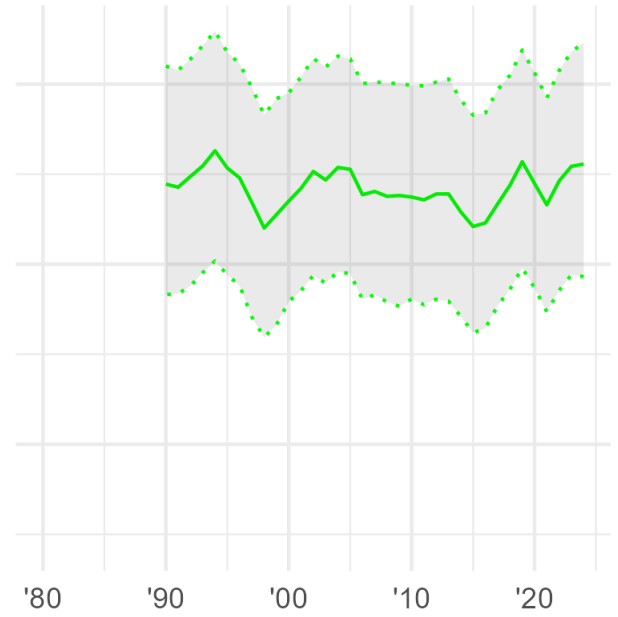
M-East & N-Africa



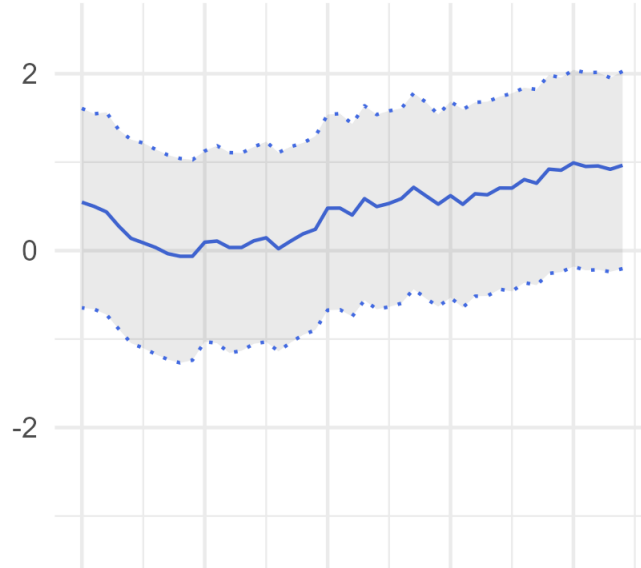
Sub-Saharan Africa



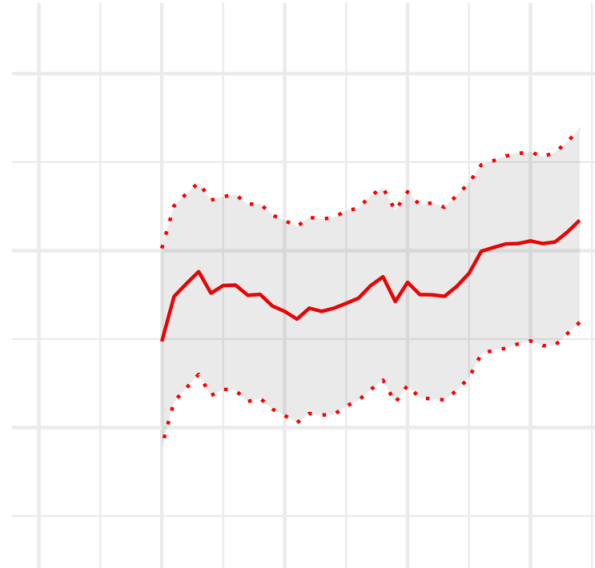
Asia & Pacific



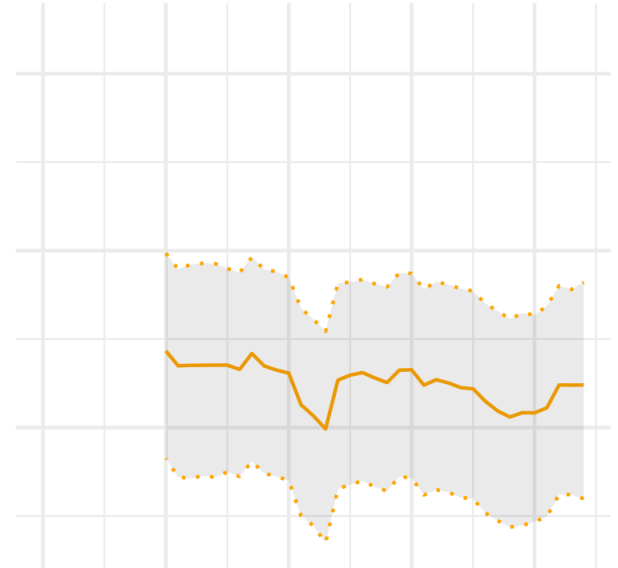
W-Europe & N-America



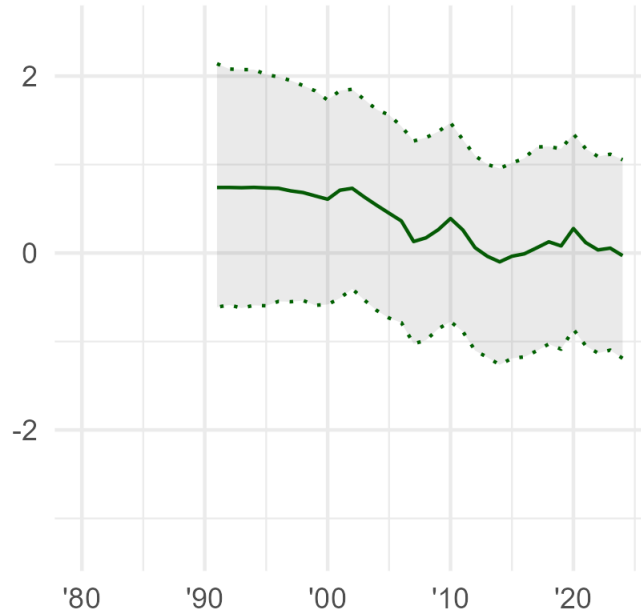
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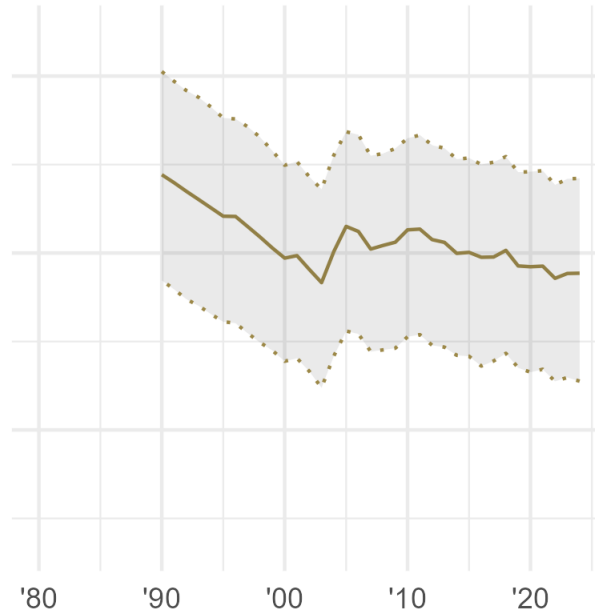
L-America & Caribbean



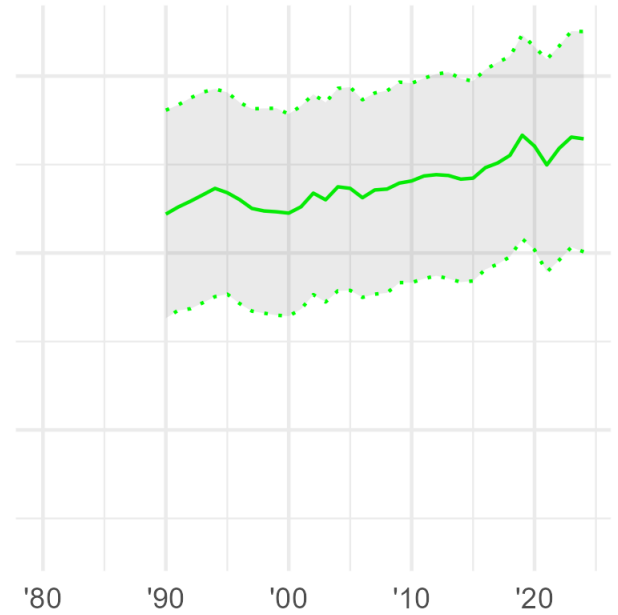
M-East & N-Africa



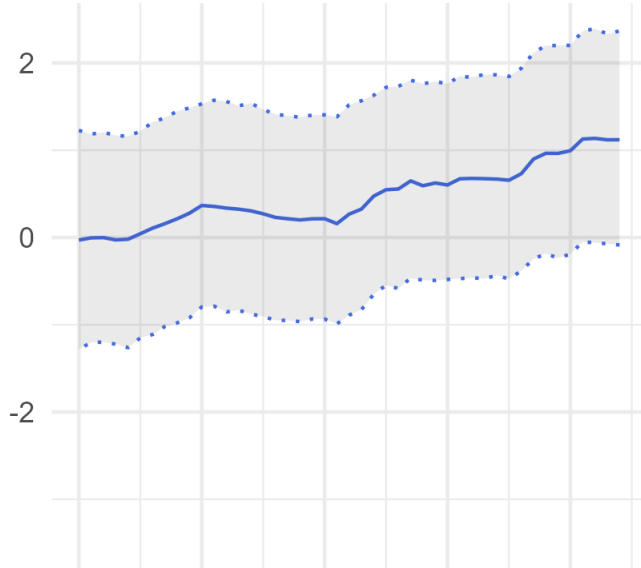
Sub-Saharan Africa



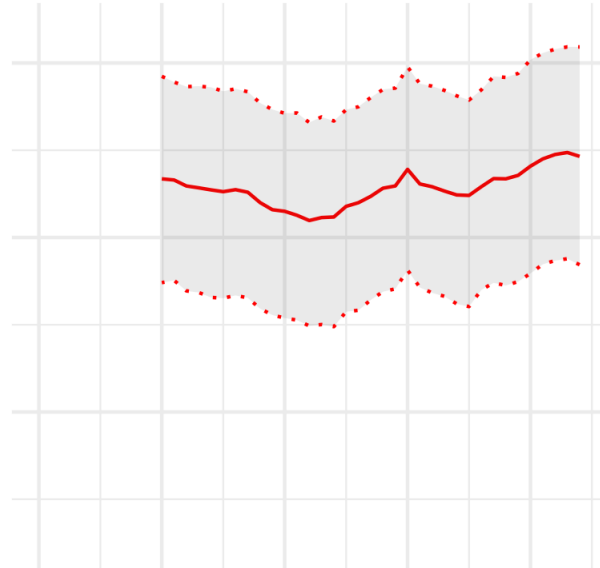
Asia & Pacific



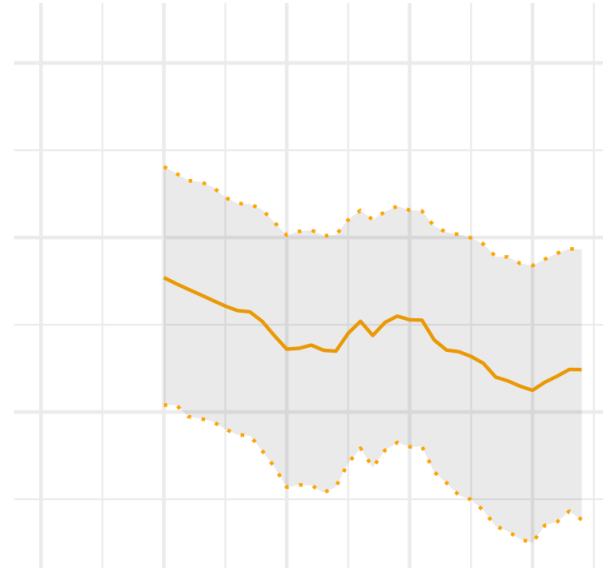
W-Europe & N-America



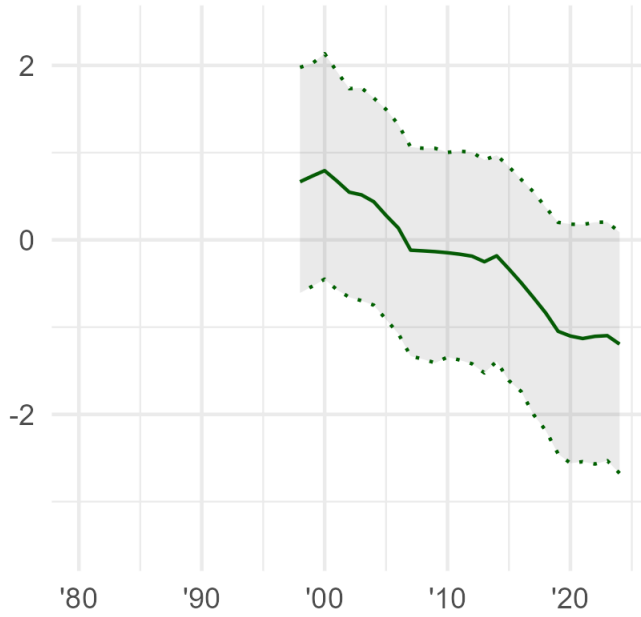
E-Europe & C-Asia



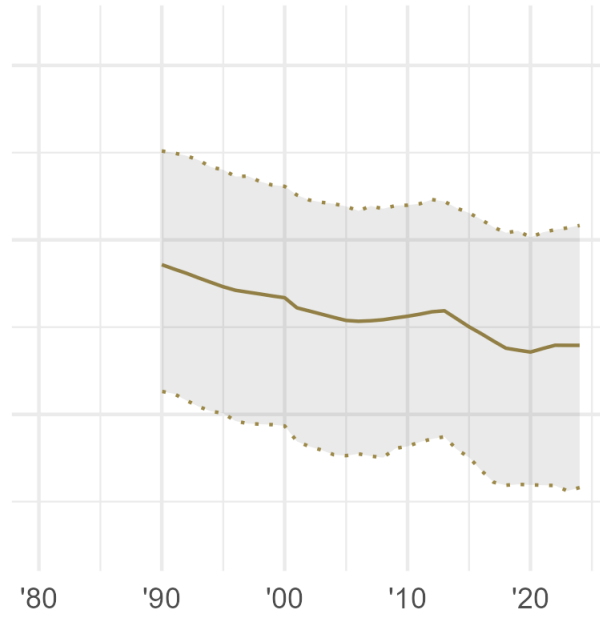
L-America & Caribbean



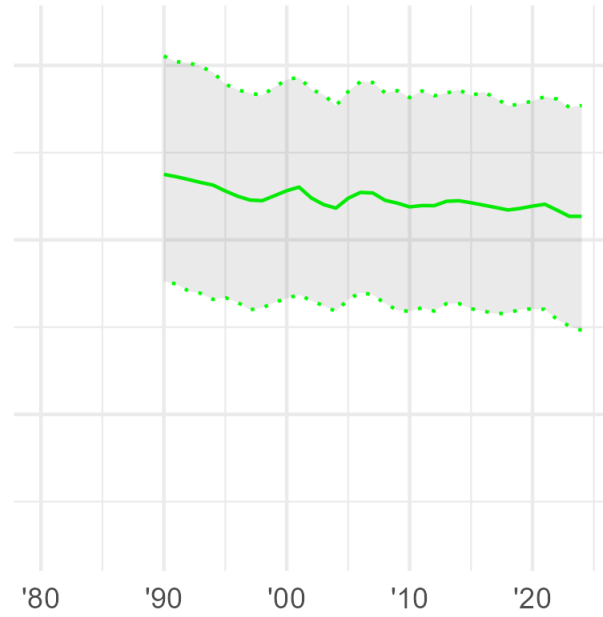
M-East & N-Africa



Sub-Saharan Africa



Asia & Pacific



# Does distrust drive backsliding?

- Kołczyńska and Bürkner (2026, 1):
  - “Political trust has a positive effect on democracy, but only in countries that have already achieved high quality of democracy”

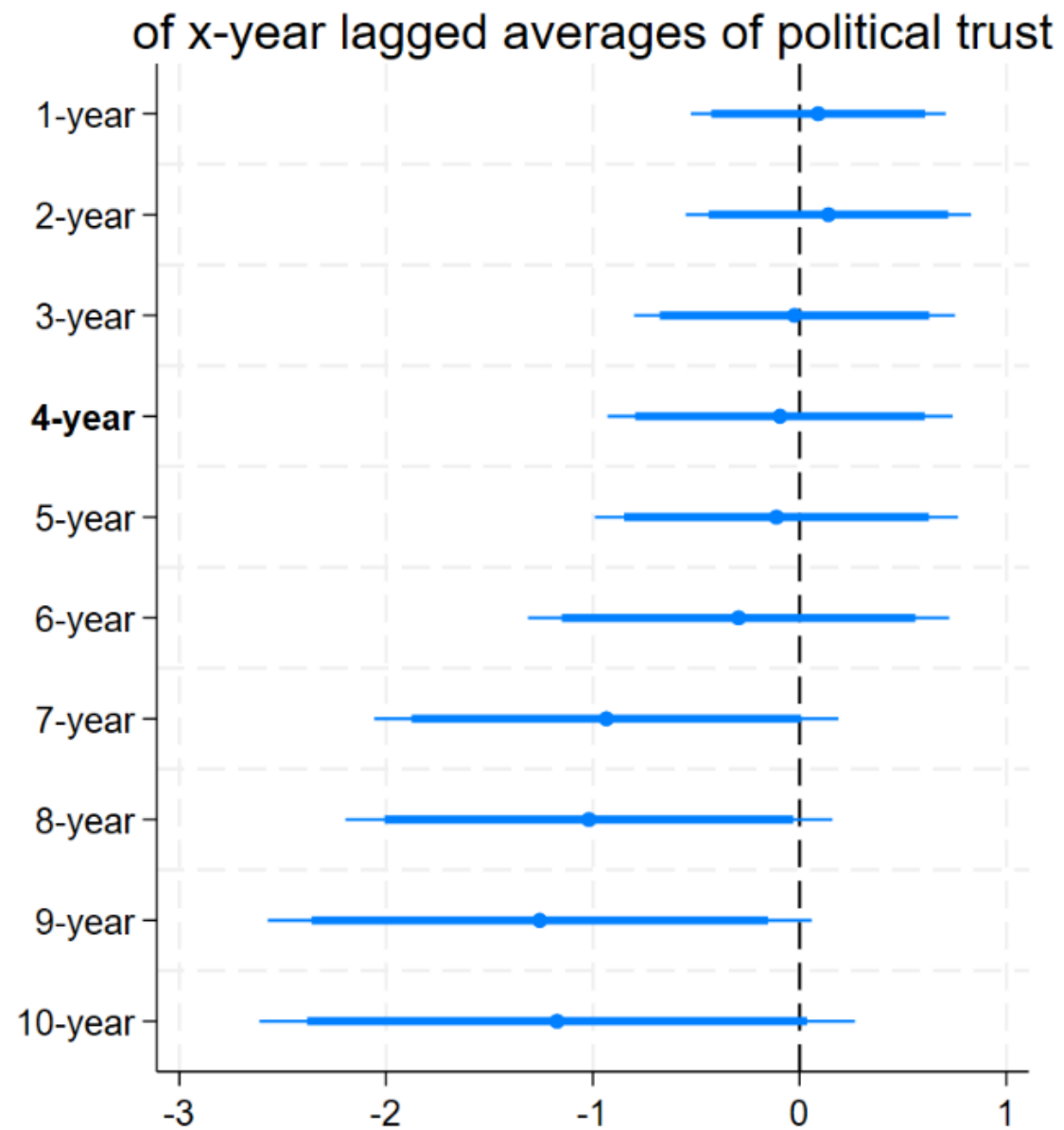
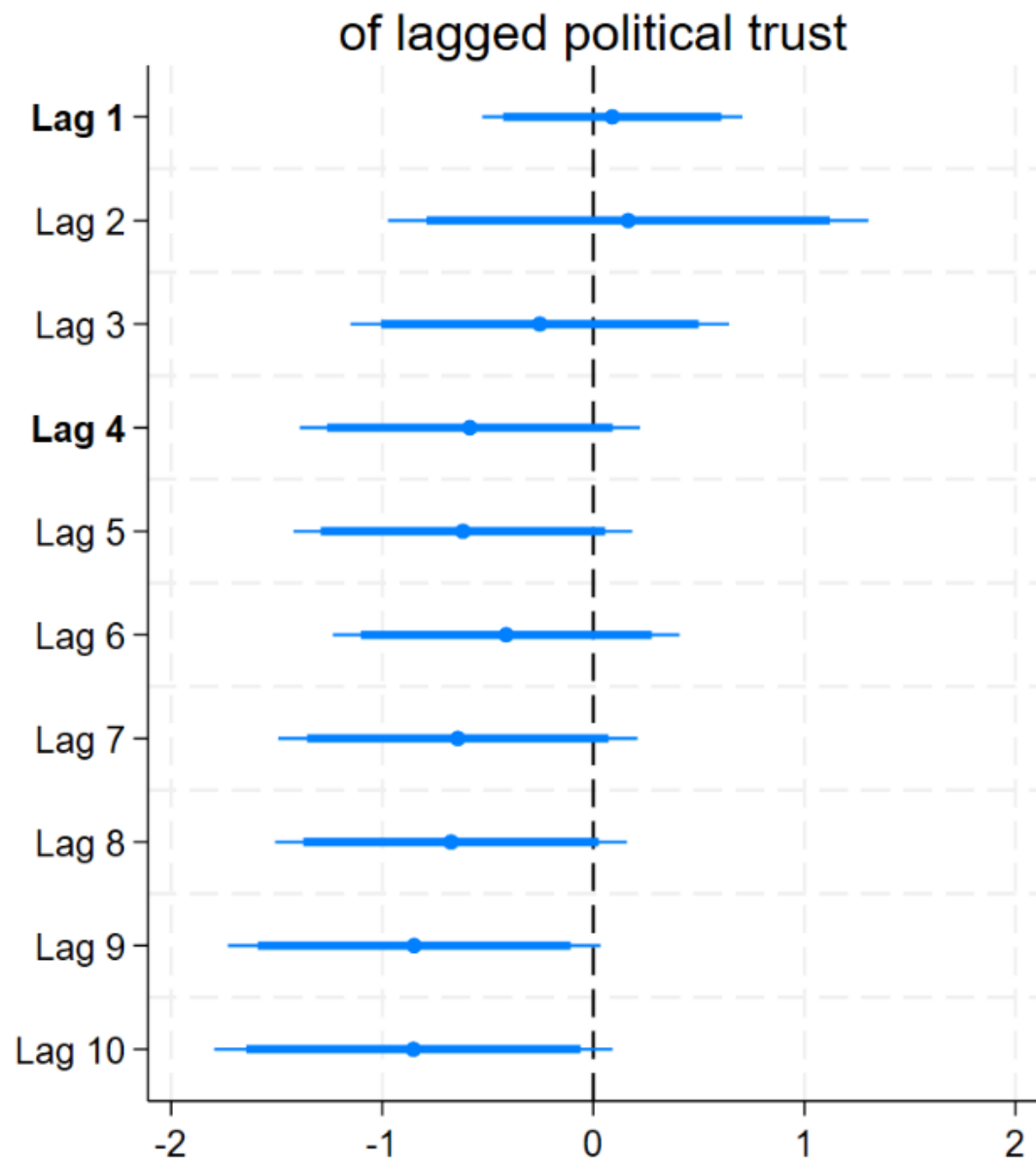
# Does distrust drive backsliding?

- Work in progress with Tom van der Meer and Marta Kołczyńska
  - “The macro-level consequences of political trust for democratic stability and reform”
- Consider three rivalling theories about the link between political trust and regime change:
  - Declining trust erodes democracy (alienation)
  - Declining trust induces more democracy (critical citizens)
  - Declining trust predicts backsliding but does not cause it (canary in the coal mine)

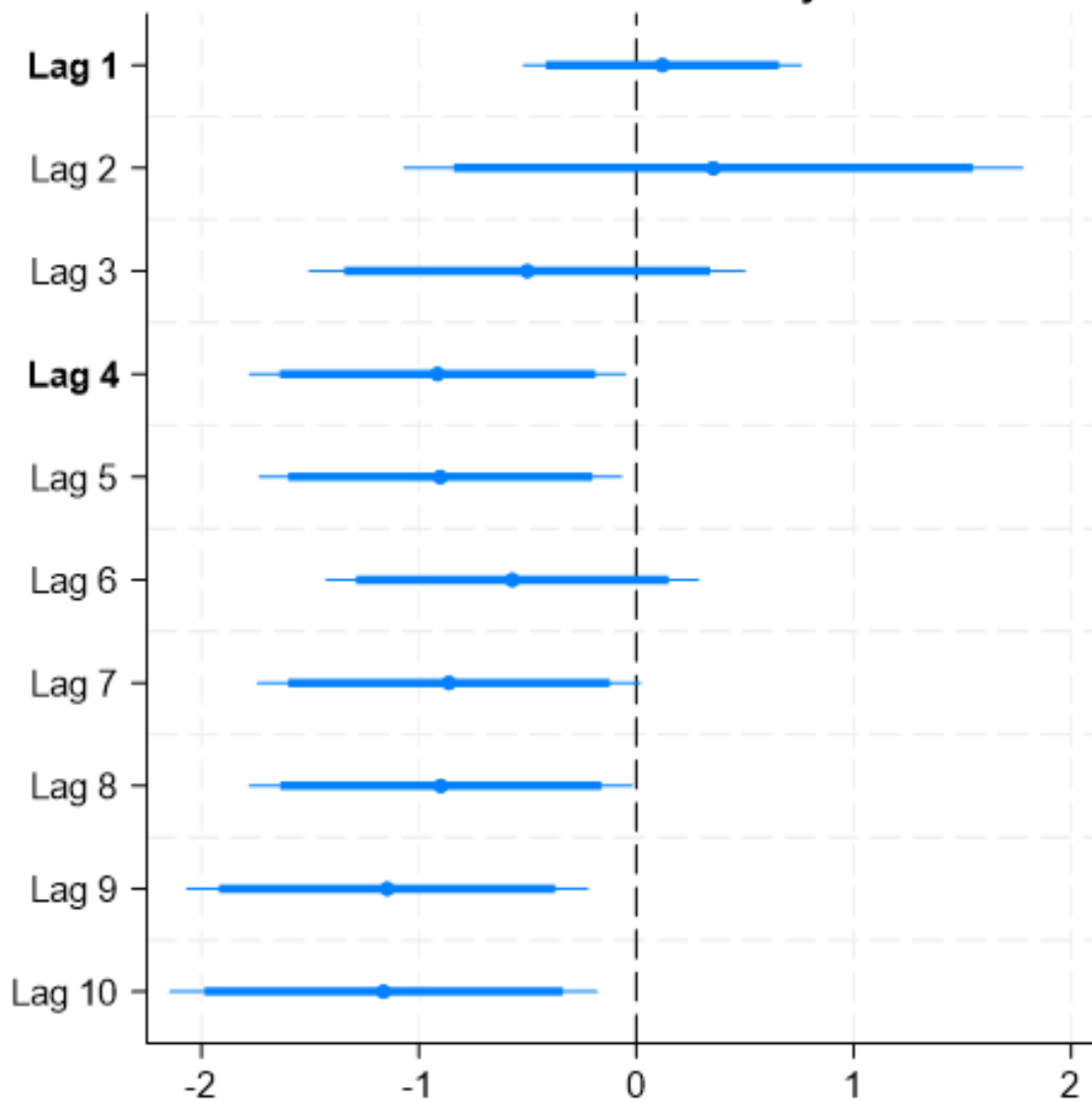
# Does distrust drive backsliding?

- We look at changes in regime status, electoral reform and direct democracy (but I only present the first here)
- Take time seriously in our theory: changes that work through electoral processes usually do not occur immediately (see also Valgarðsson and van der Meer, 2025)
- Use data on political trust from 40 survey projects covering 2,667 country-years in 105 countries up until 2024
- Data on regime change from Varieties of Democracy
  - Some complications!
- Within-between models with trust lags up to 10 years

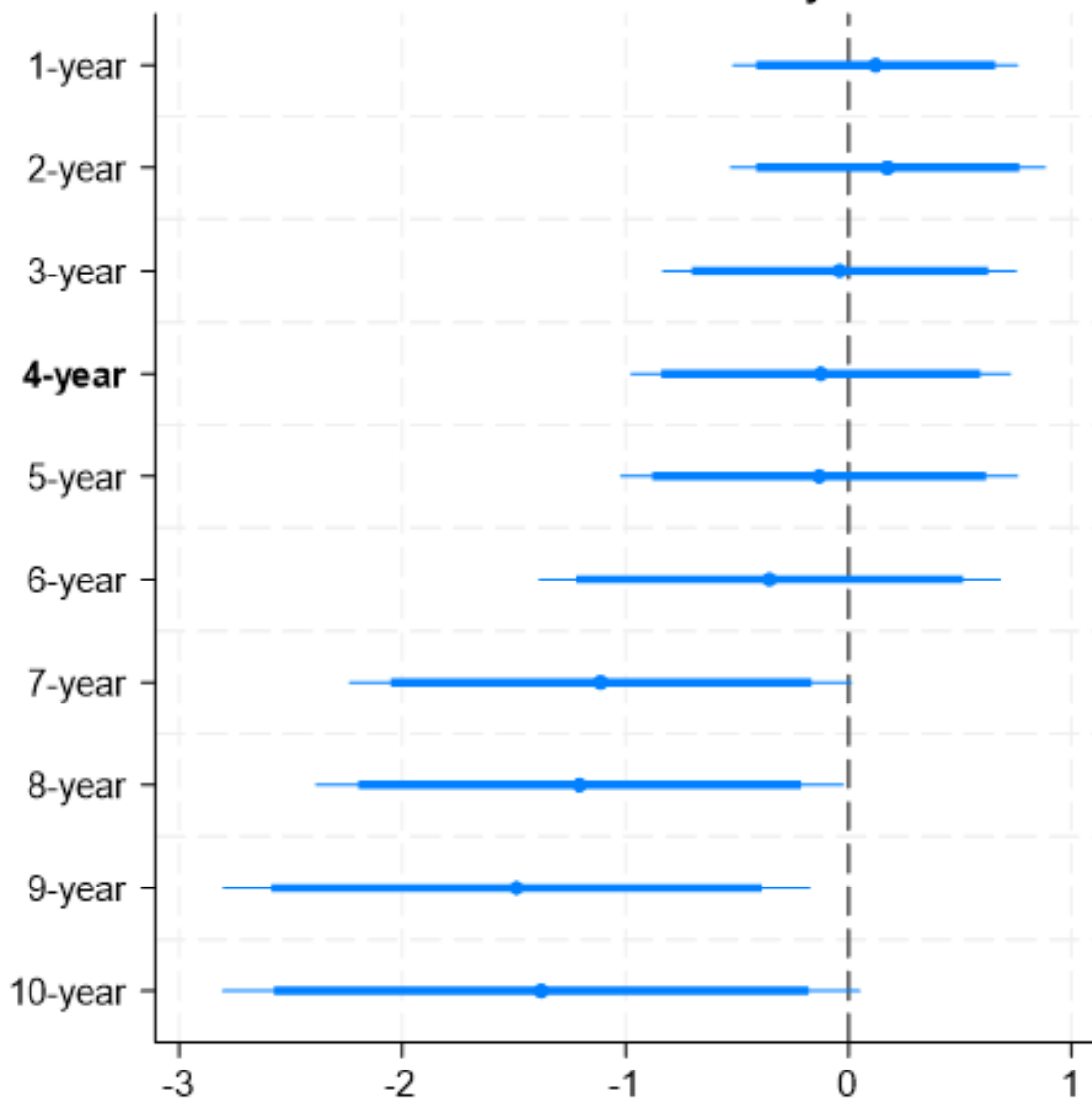
# Within-country effects on the event of regime change



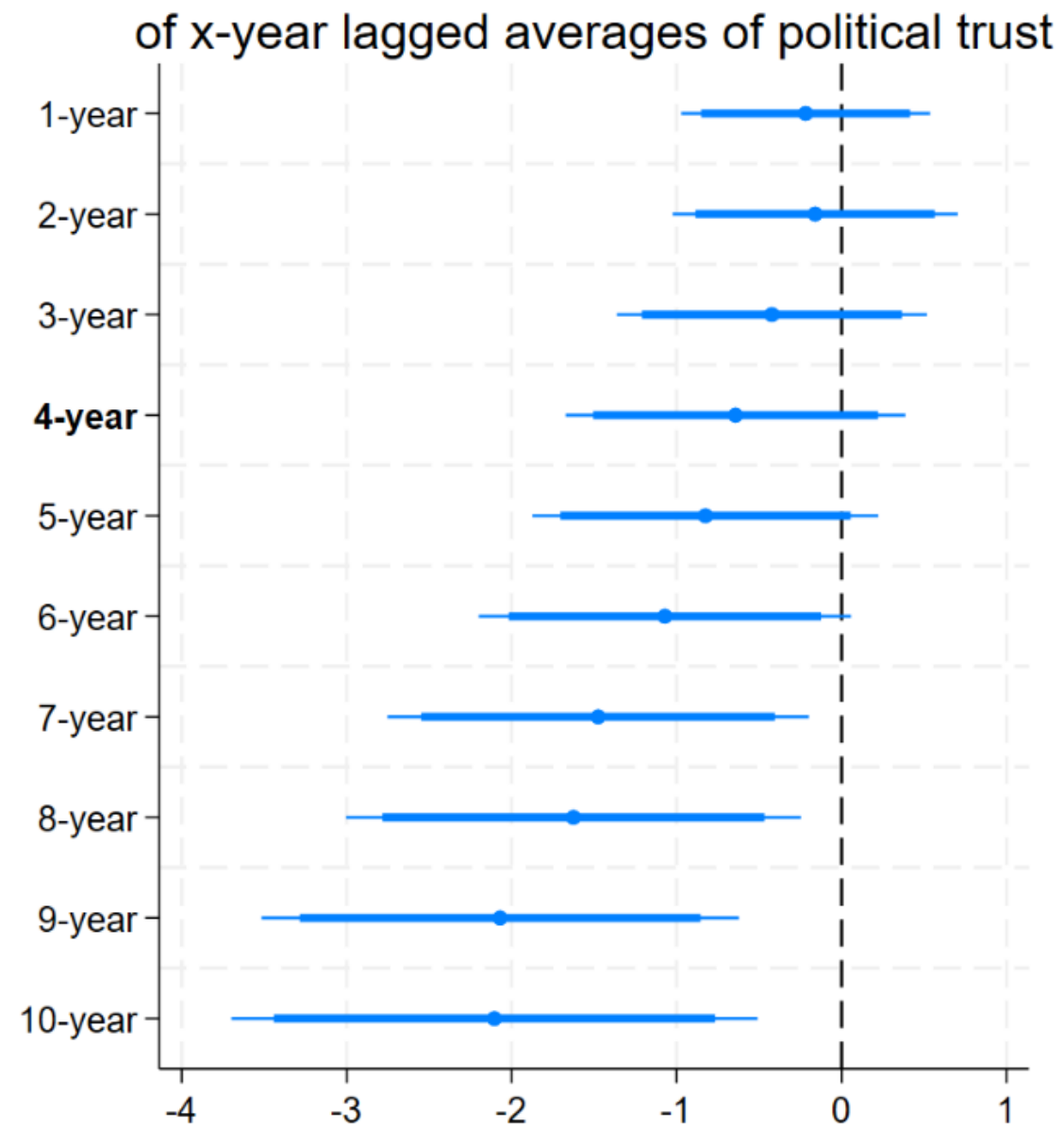
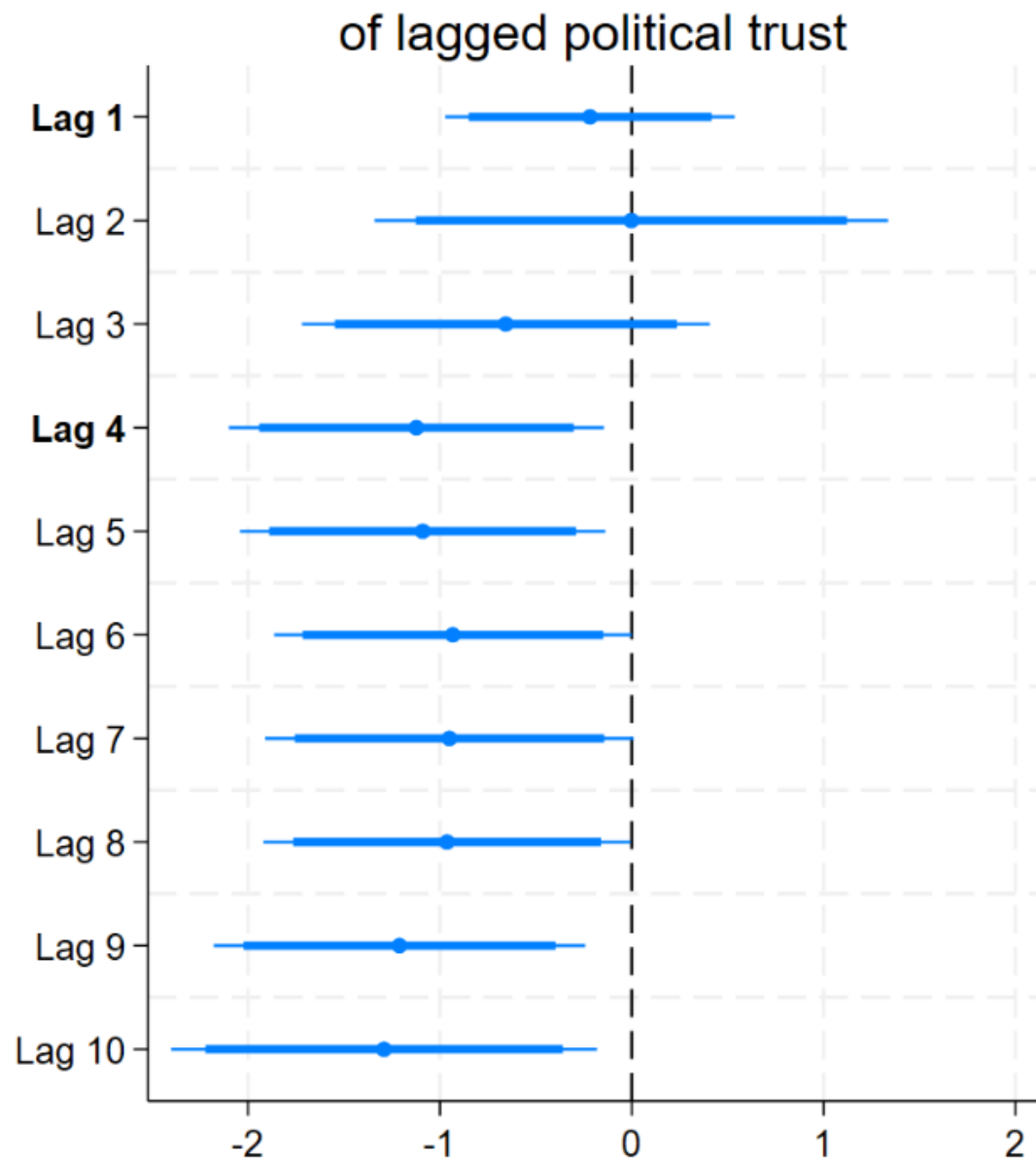
Within-country effects on the event of regime change of lagged political trust without uncertainty



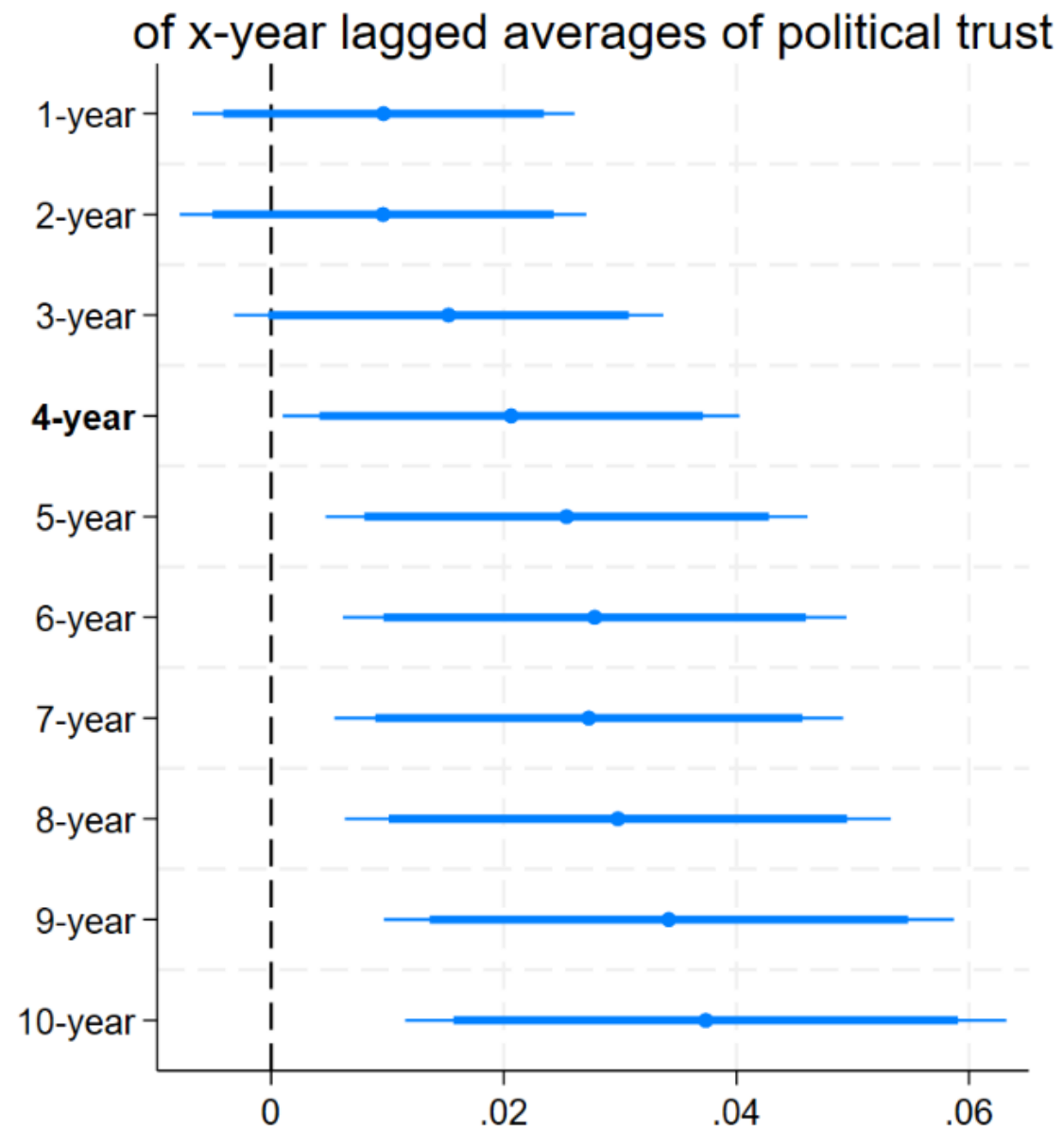
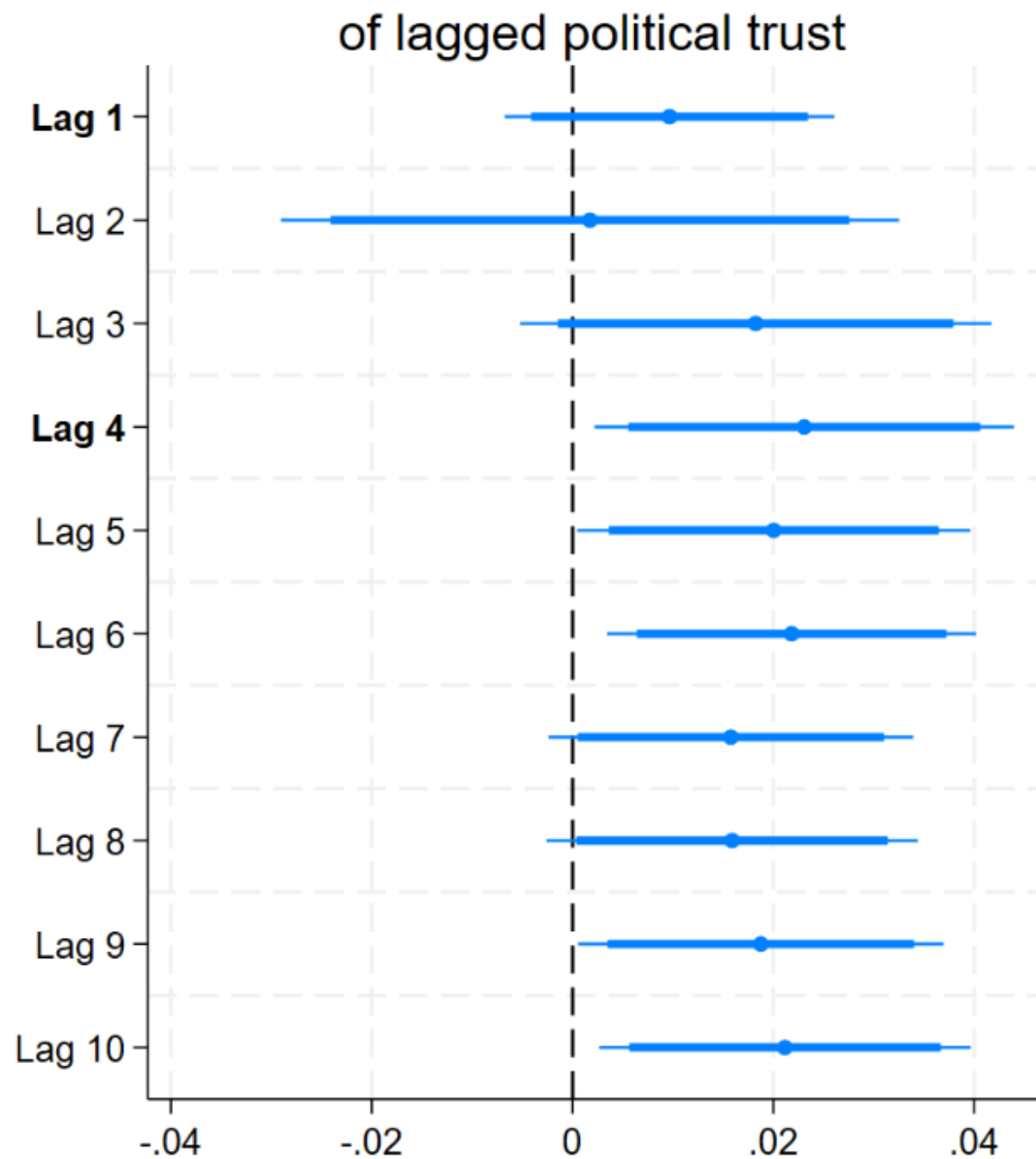
Within-country effects on the event of regime change of x-year lagged averages of political trust without uncertainty



# Within-country effects on the event of regime decline



# Within-country effects on the direction of regime change



# Does distrust drive backsliding?

- Probably!