

Fairness perceptions and political trust in Europe

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Why we should study determinants of trust

- **those individuals who trust are different from those who do not trust:** e.g. higher voter turnout, more spending-, immigration, and environment-friendly policy preferences and more positive health-outcomes (for an overview see Devine, 2022; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009)
- empirically, there is a **polarisation in trust levels** within countries
- **income inequality** as one determinant of trust is widely studied but also widely contested (Anderson and Singer, 2008; Goubin and Hooghe, 2020; Stephany, 2017)

Polarisation in trust: Country means of political trust remain stable while standard deviations increase

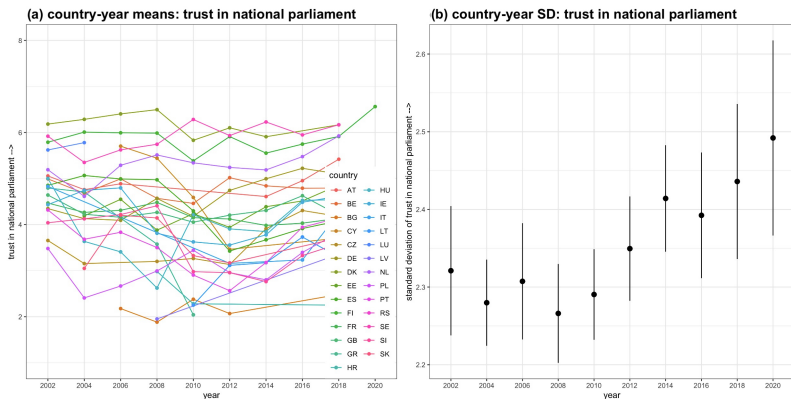


Figure 1: Mean trust in the national parliament by country over time (2002- 2020) (left) and average standard deviation of trust in the national parliament within a country over time (right) Source: European Social Survey 1-10. own calculations.

Theoretical Background: the role of perceptions

political trust = 'A (individuals) trusts B (political institutions) to do X (fulfill their inequality preferences)'

(Citrin and Stoker, 2018; Levi and Stoker, 2000)

- research on political preferences: individuals often have **inaccurate (and biased) information about inequality** (e.g. Engelhardt and Wagener, 2018; Osberg and Smeeding, 2006; Iversen and Soskice, 2015; Niehues, 2014; Norton and Ariely, 2011)
- idea: actively **operationalising perceptions helps us to better understand individuals' feelings about inequality**

My argument & how I test it

Argument:

- (1) individuals compare their perceptions of inequality to their preference for inequality
- (2) if they identify a gap between what they perceive and what they prefer(=*fairness gap*), they lose trust in political institutions.

How to test it:

- data for trust measures: European Social Survey (ESS): 2002, 2010, 2018
- data for fairness measures: ISSP 1999, 2009, 2019
- merged by: (1) country-year, (2) work status, (3) sex, (4) age, (5) education
- country-level data: Worldbank, OECD, Standardized World Income Inequality Database
- POLS (with clustered SEs)

Measuring political trust

Using this card, please tell me on a score of 0-10 how much you personally trust each of the institutions I read out. 0 means you do not trust an institution at all, and 10 means you have complete trust. Firstly...

- ...[country]'s parliament?
- ...the legal system?
- ...politicians?
- ...political parties?

I build an equally-weighted index (in line with past research)
(Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$)

Measuring the fairness gap

'These five diagrams show different types of society. Please [...] look at the diagrams and decide which you think best describes [country]. [...]

- perceived: *'[...] What type of society is [country] today?'*
- preferred: *'[...] What do you think [country] ought to be like – which would you prefer?'*

fairness gap = perceived gini - preferred gini

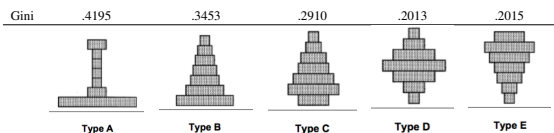


Figure 2: Question of the ISSP Master Questionnaire.

Measuring the fairness gap

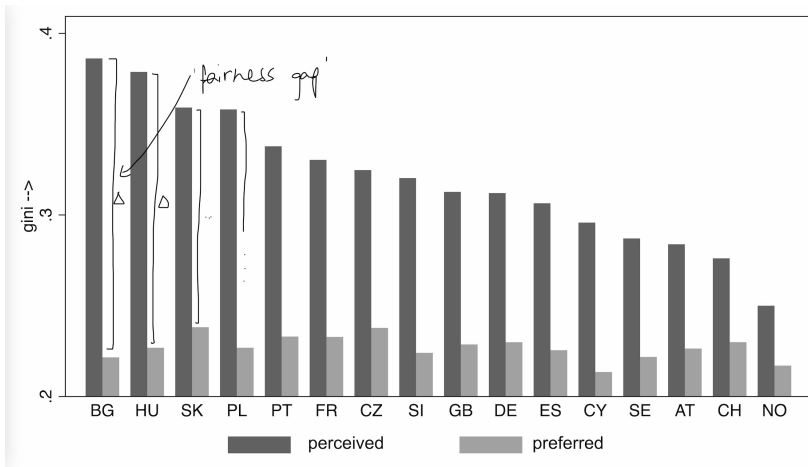


Figure 3: average perceived and preferred inequality by country. Source: ISSP Social Inequality; own calculations.

Scatterplot: The fairness gap is correlated with political trust

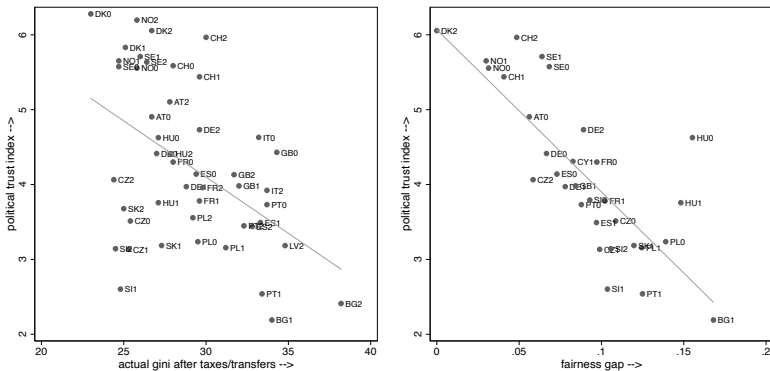


Figure 4: scatterplot: actual inequality (left) and fairness gap (right) and political trust. Note: N=31. Source: ESS 2002, 2010, 2018 & ISSP 1999, 2009, 2019. Own calculations. $R^2 = 0.21$ (left), $R^2 = 0.56$ (right).

POLS: The fairness gap is correlated with political trust

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
DV	pol. trust	pol. trust	pol. trust	pol. trust	pol. trust
aggregation level	countryyear	work. status	sex	age	education
	b/se	b/se	b/se	b/se	b/se
gini (disp. inc.)	-0.03 0.03	-0.08* 0.03	-0.04 0.03	-0.04 0.03	-0.04 0.03
fairness gap	-0.13** 0.04	-0.05** 0.02	-0.12*** 0.03	-0.09*** 0.02	-0.07** 0.02
N (individual)	41132	41132	41132	41132	41132
N (macro/meso)	31	62	93	155	155

Table 1: POLS regressions on political trust using different aggregation levels of the fairness gap. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Coefficients for controls, country- and year-FE and constant not shown. Source: ESS 2002, 2010, 2018 & ISSP 1999, 2009, 2019. Own calculations.

Conclusion

- **evaluating inequalities as fair matters for political trust;** might matter more than actual levels of inequality
- the **fairness gap varies across socio-economic groups;** e.g. higher educated individuals perceive a lower fairness gap
 - this is, however, mainly driven by lower levels of perceived inequality rather than lower levels of preferred inequality

A: The fairness gap mediates the link between actual inequality and political trust

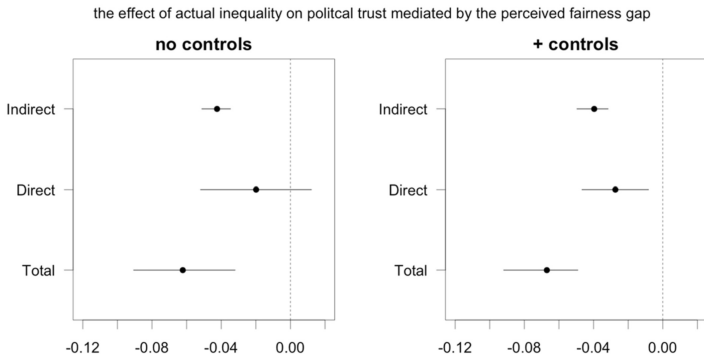


Figure 5: Mediation analysis of actual inequality on political trust with the fairness gap as mediator without controls (left) and with controls (right). 95%-ci. Source: ESS 2002, 2010, 2018 ISSP 1999, 2009, 2019. Own calculations.

A: Cross-country variation in political trust.

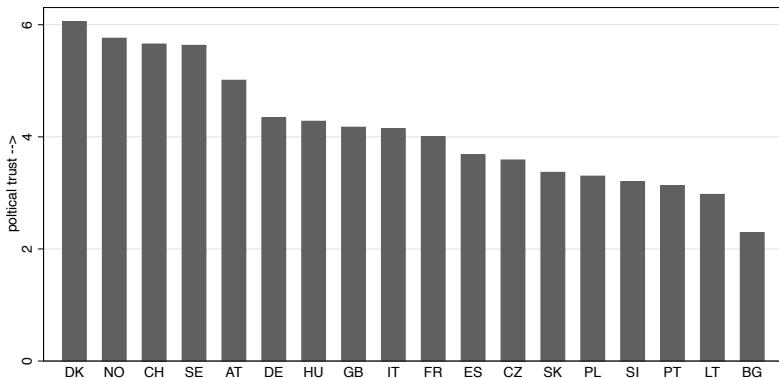


Figure 6: Histogram of average political trust by country. Source: ESS 2002, 2010, 2018

A: Cross-country variation in the fairness gap.

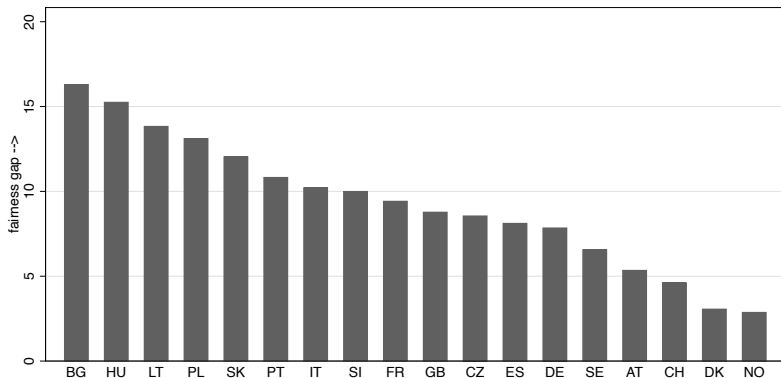


Figure 7: Histogram of average fairness gap by country. Source: ISSP 1999, 2009, 2019.

A: More variation in perceived rather than preferred inequality.

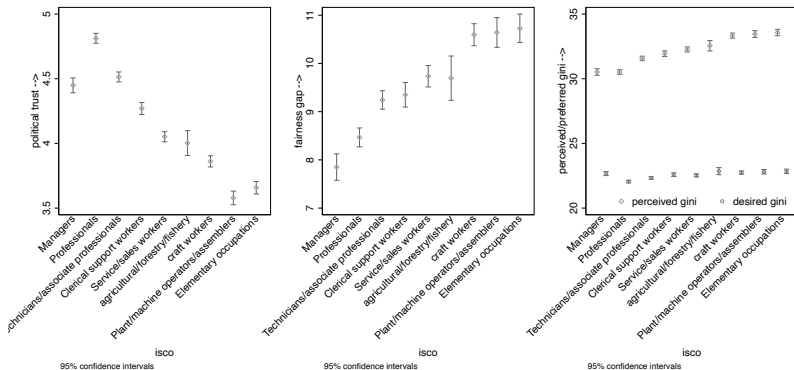


Figure 8: Political trust, the fairness gap, and perceived and preferred inequality by isco classification.

A: More variation in perceived rather than preferred inequality.

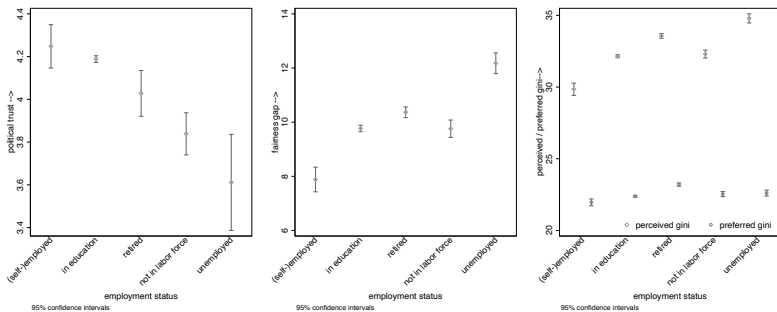


Figure 9: Political trust, the fairness gap, and perceived and preferred inequality by working status.

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