

Institutional trust and life satisfaction around 2008

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Presentation overview

Background and concepts

Why institutions, trust, and subjective well-being?

Research framework

Institutional domains, the 2008 financial crisis and hypotheses

Empirical study

Study design, initial findings, next steps and challenges

Why institutions matter for well-being

An established economic question

How do rules and public institutions support economic performance?

A wider welfare question

Do those institutions also help people live better lives?

Channels beyond income

Protection, fair treatment and a voice in public decisions may matter directly.

Why institutional trust entered the debate

Social relationships and well-being

Research on social capital drew attention to trust alongside income.

Citizens' assessments of institutions

Institutional trust captures confidence in particular public institutions.

A distinct empirical question

How does that confidence relate to people's own life evaluations?

Social capital and subjective well-being

Networks

Social ties and civic participation

Norms

Shared expectations and civic orientation

Trust

Social trust and institutional trust

Focus: institutional trust



Measuring quality of life

Economic indicators

GDP and income

Material living conditions

Subjective well-being

Life satisfaction

Positive and negative affect

This study: life satisfaction



Policy needs a more specific account of trust

Which institutions?

Political representation and legal protection involve different expectations.

In which places?

Economic conditions and governance differ across European regions.

At which times?

The same trust dimension may have a different role during economic disruption.

Why distinguish two institutional trust domains?

Basis in the literature	Political institutions	Legal and police institutions
Institutional role	Representation and policy choices	Enforcing rules and protecting rights
What citizens expect	Responsiveness and political alignment	Fair treatment and impartial application
Indicators in this study	Parliament, politicians, parties	Legal system, police

Different roles and expectations justify separate trust measures. Economic-crisis research has also used this distinction.

Political and legal/police trust

Representational institutions

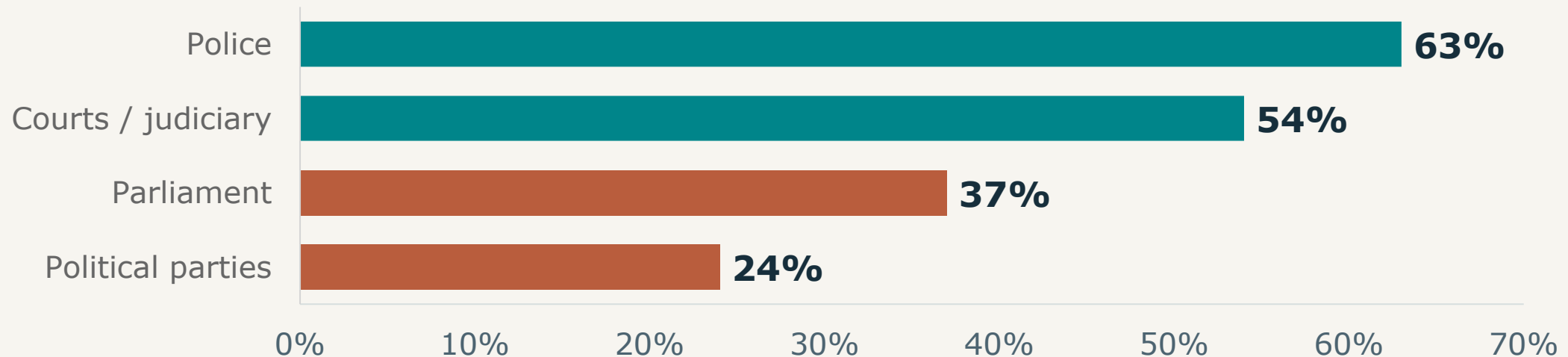
Parliament, politicians, parties
Policy choices and political alignment

Rothstein & Stolle (2008)

Legal and order institutions

Legal system, police
Impartiality and procedural fairness

Rothstein & Stolle (2008)



Share reporting high or moderately high trust, OECD average (2023)

Economic crisis in an institutional framework

Working definition

A major disruption in economic activity that increases uncertainty and strains institutional responses.

Scope of this study

The 2008 financial crisis and its economic aftermath in Europe.

Why focus on the 2008 financial crisis?

Reason	Relevance for this first study
Well documented chronology	Escalation in 2008 and recession in 2009 provide a common reference.
Scale and persistence	A major global disruption with lasting economic losses.
Comparable survey coverage	ESS3–ESS5 cover a baseline, onset and early aftermath.
Variation across places	European economies and regions experienced different pressures.

Why might the two trust relationships change in 2008?

Trust domain	Why the relationship may change
Political trust	Crisis policy choices and perceived responsiveness become more visible.
Legal/police trust	Economic insecurity may increase the value of fair treatment and reliable rules.
Across crisis stages	Immediate expectations and later experiences may pull relationships in different directions.

**A different role in the crisis may mean a different link to life satisfaction.
The direction of change remains an empirical question.**

Research question and hypotheses

Main research question

How did political and legal/police trust relate to life satisfaction across the stages of the 2008 financial crisis?

H1: positive associations

Both trust dimensions are positively associated with life satisfaction.

H2: temporal differences

Their associations may change differently at onset and in the aftermath.

Further hypotheses and empirical scope

H3: institutional resilience

Legal/police trust may retain a stronger association under economic strain.

H4: spatial context

Regional economic strain may moderate the trust–life satisfaction associations.

What the current results cover

H1 and trust-by-period terms. H3 needs comparable scales and formal contrasts. H4 requires the regional extension.

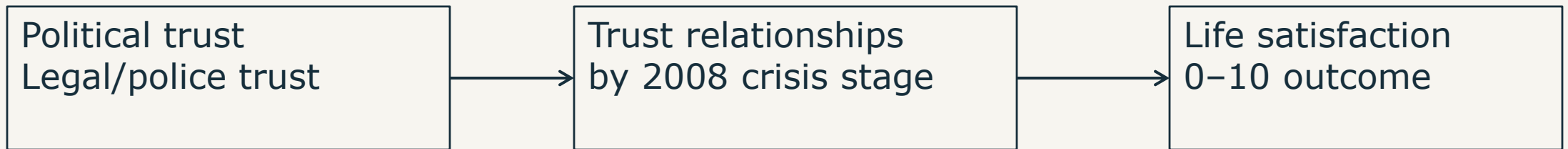
ESS questions and variable roles

Role	Item / question content	Scoring
Dependent variable	stflife: satisfaction with life as a whole, nowadays	0 extremely dissatisfied 10 extremely satisfied
Political trust indicators	trstprl: country's parliament trstplt: politicians trstprt: political parties	0 no trust at all 10 complete trust
Legal/police trust indicators	trstlgl: legal system trstplc: police	0 no trust at all 10 complete trust

Trust question: how much do you personally trust each institution?

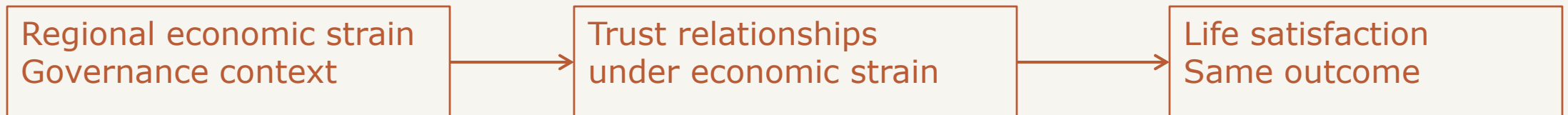
Overall proposed model: current analysis and extension

CURRENT: individuals within countries



Both scores enter together; countries have different starting levels.

NEXT: individuals within regions within countries



Extend the current model with individual controls and direct domain comparisons.

What the initial results show

Positive baseline relationships

Both political and legal/police trust accompany higher life satisfaction.

Limited change across periods

A small decrease appears for legal/police trust in ESS5. The other changes are not statistically clear.

The next test

Compare the changes directly and add regional economic conditions.

Challenges for the regional extension

Challenge	Why it matters
Timing of exposure	Economic effects may arrive after interviews or persist into later years.
Comparable regional data	Boundaries, regional identifiers and indicator coverage vary.
Trust measurement	A short legal/police scale and country differences require further checks.
Repeated cross-sections	We compare population relationships across periods, rather than follow individuals.

Discussion

Regional economic exposure

Which measures best capture local exposure to the 2008 financial crisis beyond unemployment?

Institutional comparability

How should country differences and the two-item legal/police factor enter validation?

Stronger empirical design

Which panel data or empirical designs could test mechanisms and individual changes around 2008?

Thank you

Questions and discussion

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