

**More than the sum of the parts?
Individual wellbeing and quality of
society as research paradigms in Europe**

**Eric Harrison
City University London**

Social Monitoring and Reporting
Villa Vigoni
June 2014

Overview of Presentation

- Academic and policy background
- Paradigms in wellbeing research
- Cross-national empirical analysis

GDP: And beyond...



From there to here: The fall and rise of social indicators

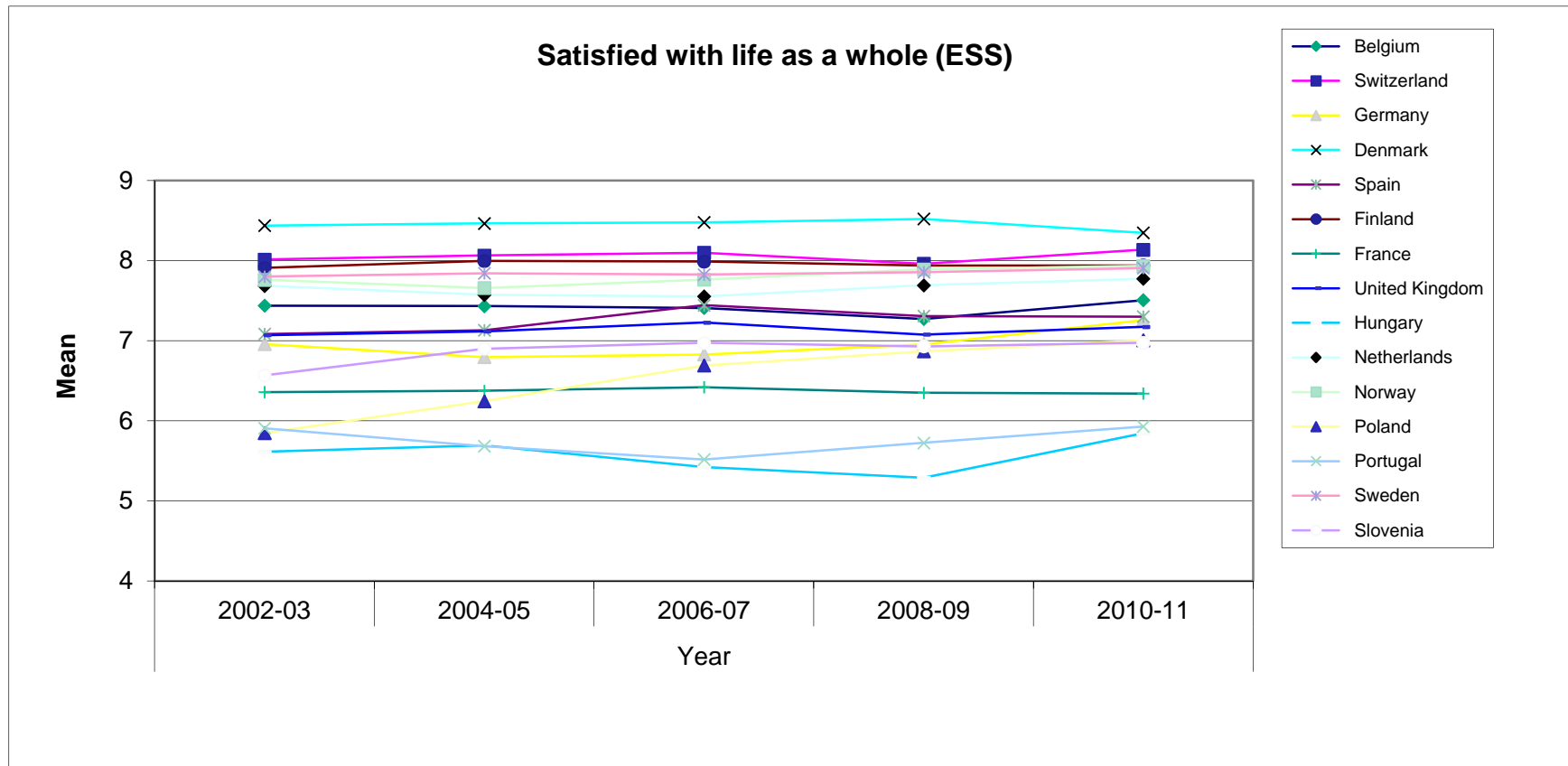
- 1960s the 'social indicators movement' became influential : Journal Social Indicators Research, 1974
- Loses momentum in 1980s but leaves academic legacy - journal *SIR* and research network, the International Society for the Study of Quality of Life (ISQOLS).
- Recent developments:
 - EU policies of 'convergence' → interest in social inclusion and the adoption of Atkinson indicators
 - The new science of happiness (Layard 2005; Oswald, 2006) has led to renewed focus on the concept of wellbeing.

Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi: So what else is new?

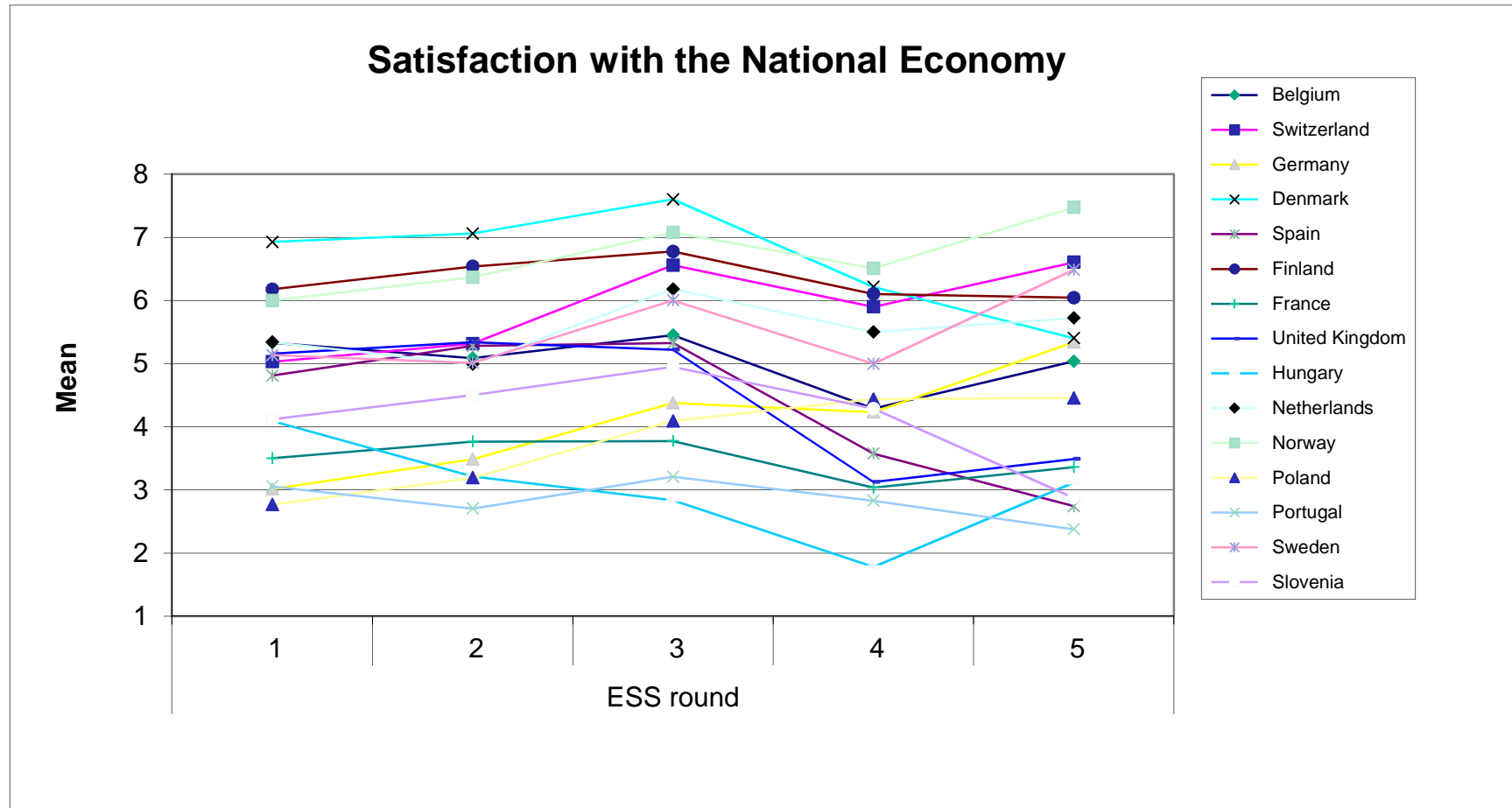
- Better measures of economic performance in a complex economy
- Multi-dimensional concept of wellbeing:
 - Material living standards (income, consumption and wealth); Health; Education; Personal activities including work; Political voice and governance; Social connections and relationships; Environment (present and future conditions); Insecurity, of an economic as well as a physical nature
- Pragmatic approach to measuring sustainability

Going beyond the individual

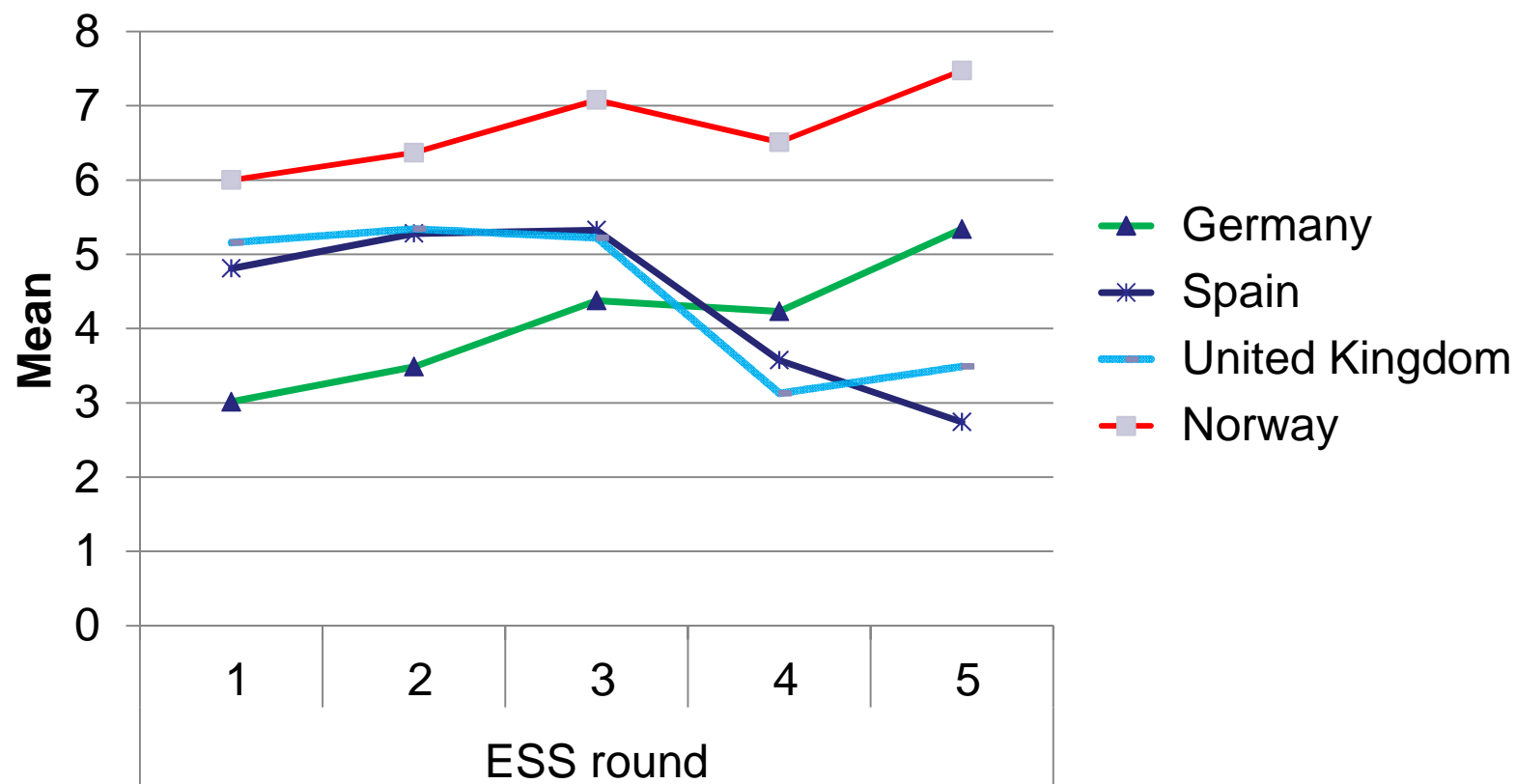
Individual Lives: Country Patterns



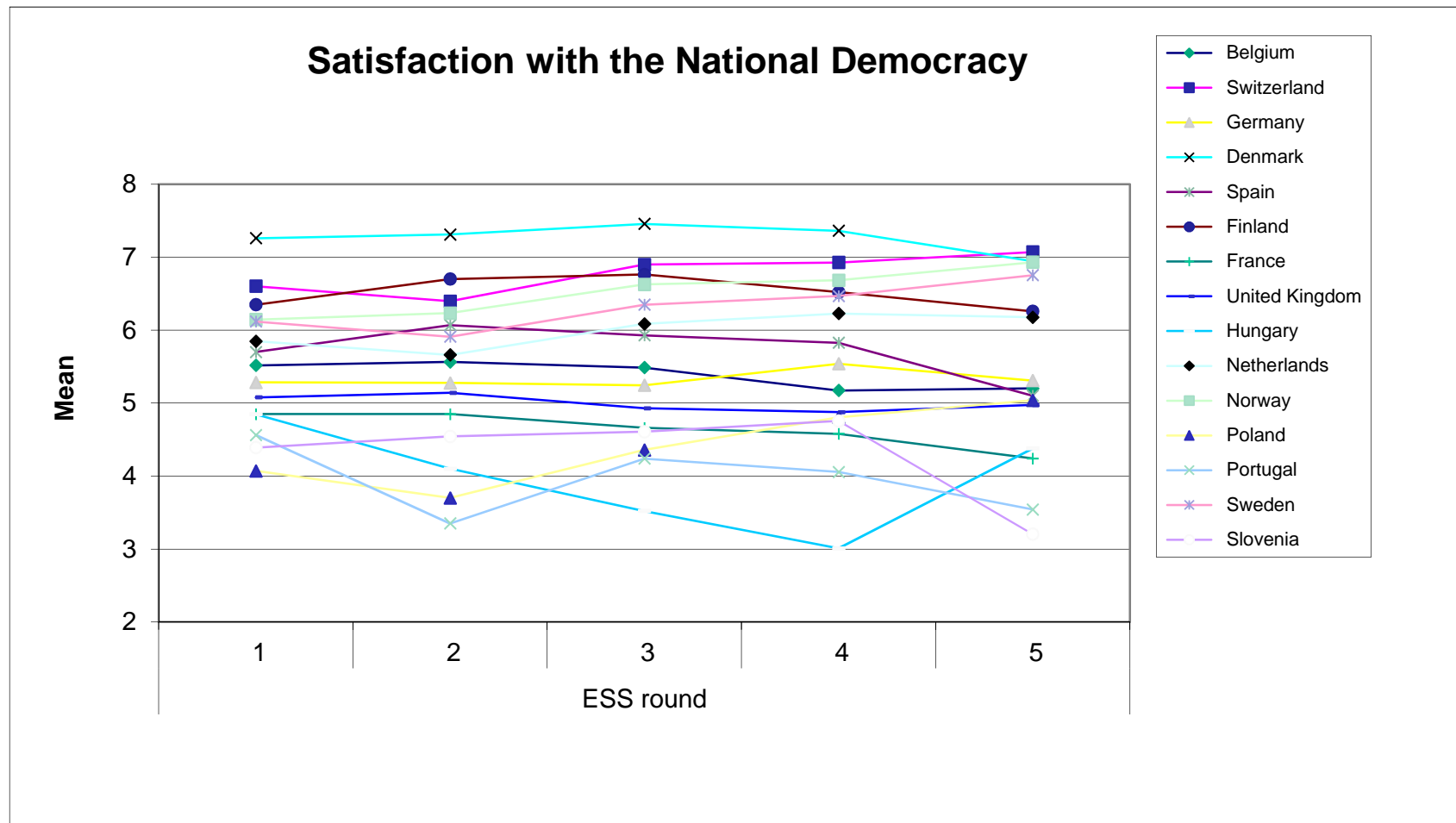
It's the economy, stupid



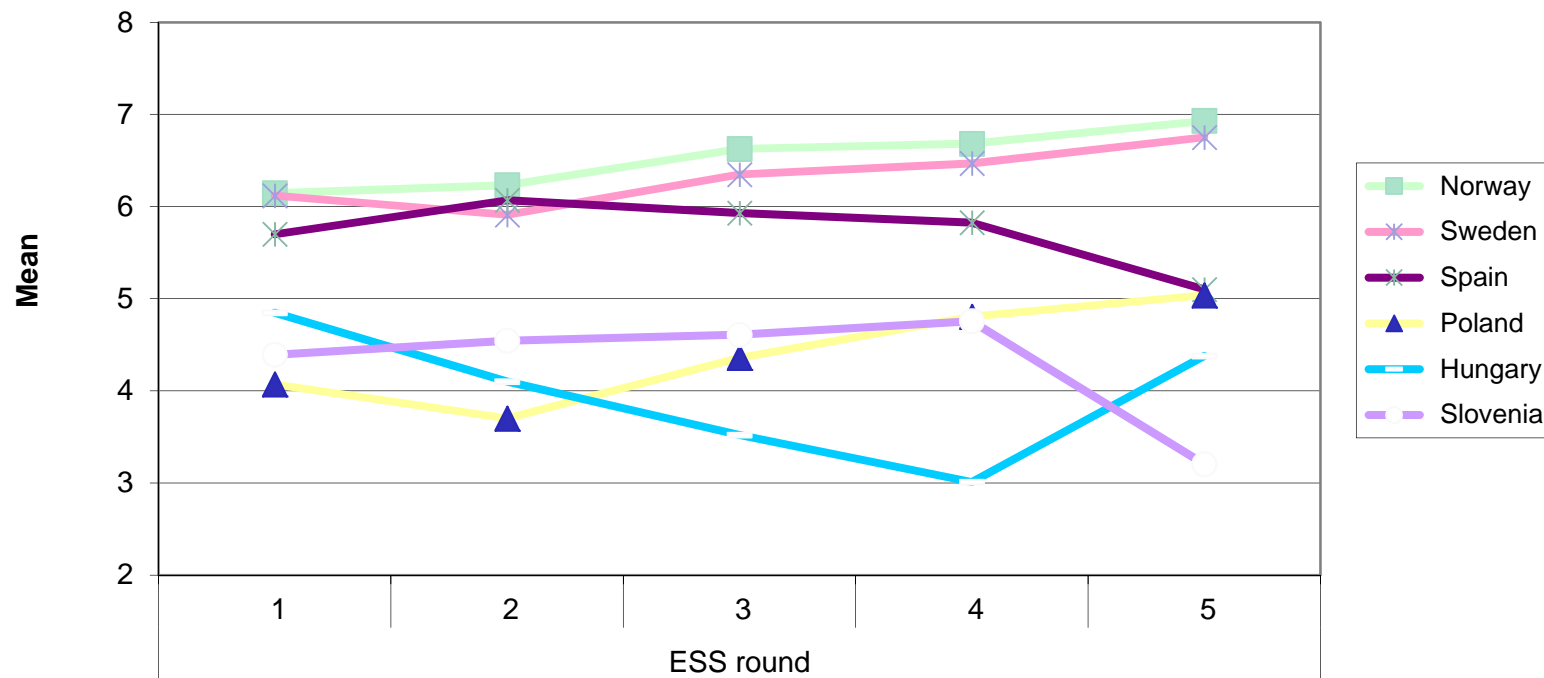
Satisfaction with the National Economy



And the politics, silly...



Satisfaction with the National Democracy



Societal Wellbeing: More than the sum of the parts?

- Recent literature on wellbeing assumes unit of analysis is the individual
- But commentary/observation is often about aggregates – communities, cities or countries
- The Broken Society, The Good Society, The Big Society
- When we say ‘Place X has a great quality of life’, we don’t mean 64% of inhabitants are above a 7/10 happiness threshold, we are evaluating collective characteristics

The good life, as we conceive it, demands a multitude of social conditions and cannot be realized without them. ...

The good life must be lived in a good society and is not fully possible otherwise.

Bertrand Russell, 1925

‘We’re all in this together’



Societal Wellbeing: A literature of many parts

■ Four categories of work

1. Individual subjective, 'perceived' wellbeing ('happiness')
2. Individual 'objective' wellbeing (living conditions)
3. Societal 'objective' wellbeing (societal outcomes)
4. Evaluations **by** individuals **of** societies (pQoS)

Measuring Societal Wellbeing: The missing link?

	Perception (attitude)	'Reality' (behavioural/ outcomes)
Individual Level		
Societal Level		

Measuring Societal Wellbeing: The missing link?

	Perception (attitude)	'Reality' (behavioural/ outcomes)
Individual Level		Living conditions, educational attainment, job quality, income, access to resources etc (Micro-data)
Societal Level		

Measuring Societal Wellbeing: The missing link?

	Perception (attitude)	'Reality' (behavioural/ outcomes)
Individual Level		Living conditions, educational attainment, job quality, income, access to resources etc (Micro-data)
Societal Level		Features of society: crime rate, income distribution, quality of education/health etc (Atkinson et al)

Measuring Societal Wellbeing: The missing link?

	Perception (attitude)	'Reality' (behavioural/ outcomes)
Individual Level	Happiness, life satisfaction, opinion about domains of life experience (ONS, OECD)	Living conditions, educational attainment, job quality, income, access to resources etc (Micro-data)
Societal Level	?	Features of society: crime rate, income distribution, quality of education/health etc (Atkinson et al)

Measuring Societal Wellbeing: The missing link?

	Perception (attitude)	'Reality' (behavioural/ outcomes)
Individual Level	Happiness, life satisfaction, opinion about domains of life experience (ONS, OECD)	Living conditions, educational attainment, job quality, income, access to resources etc (Micro-data)
Societal Level	Perception of the quality of society or societal wellbeing	Features of society: crime rate, income distribution, quality of education/health etc (Atkinson et al)

And measured all together...

	Perception (attitude)	'Reality' (behavioural/ outcomes)
Individual Level	Happiness, life satisfaction, opinion about domains of life experience (ONS, OECD)	Living conditions, educational attainment, job quality, income, access to resources etc (Micro-data)
Societal Level	Perception of the quality of society or societal wellbeing	Features of society: crime rate, income distribution, quality of education/health etc (Atkinson et al)

= Societal wellbeing

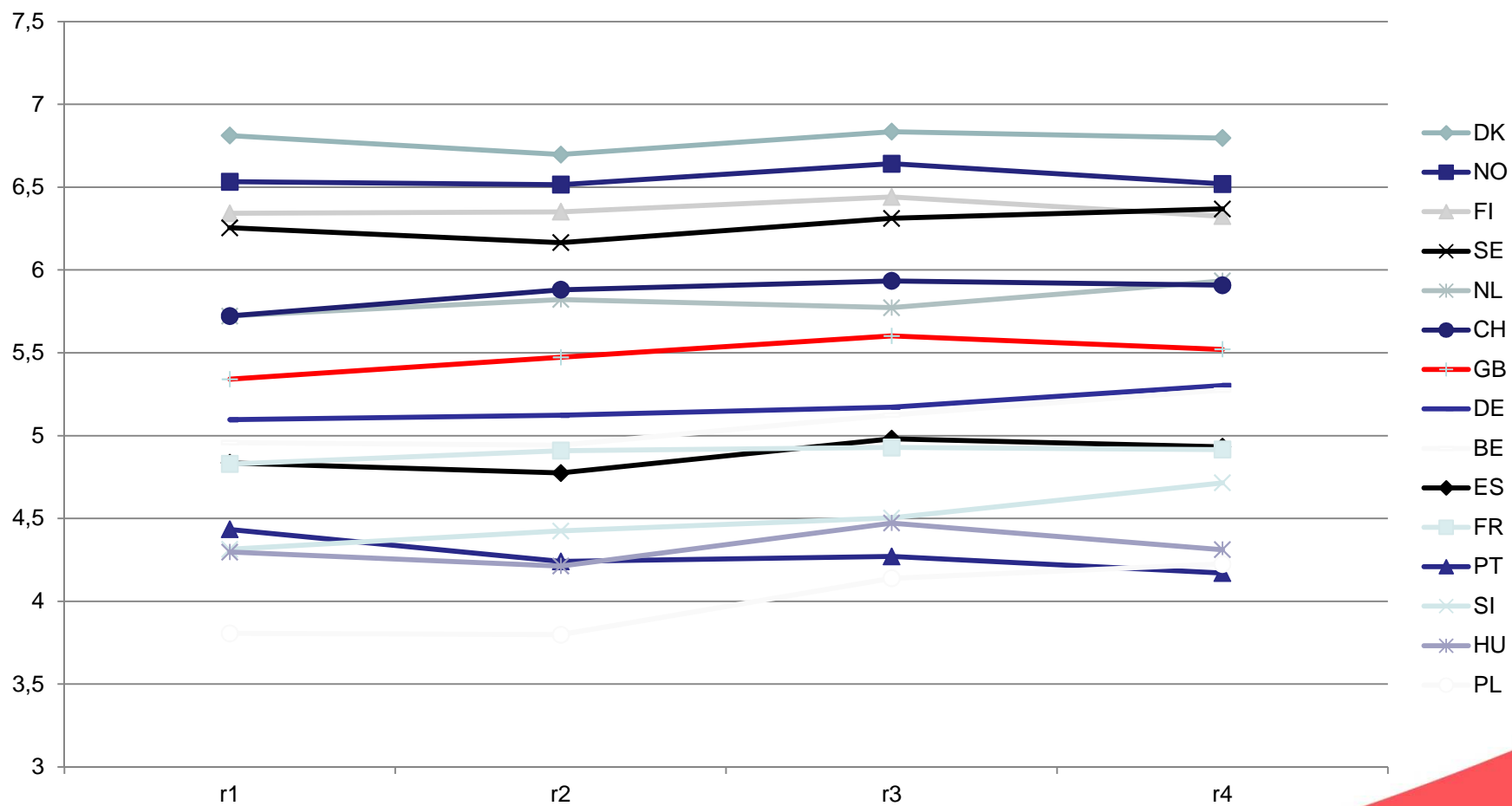
c.f. Social quality model
(Abbott and Wallace, 2011)

An Analysis of Perceived Quality of Society over time

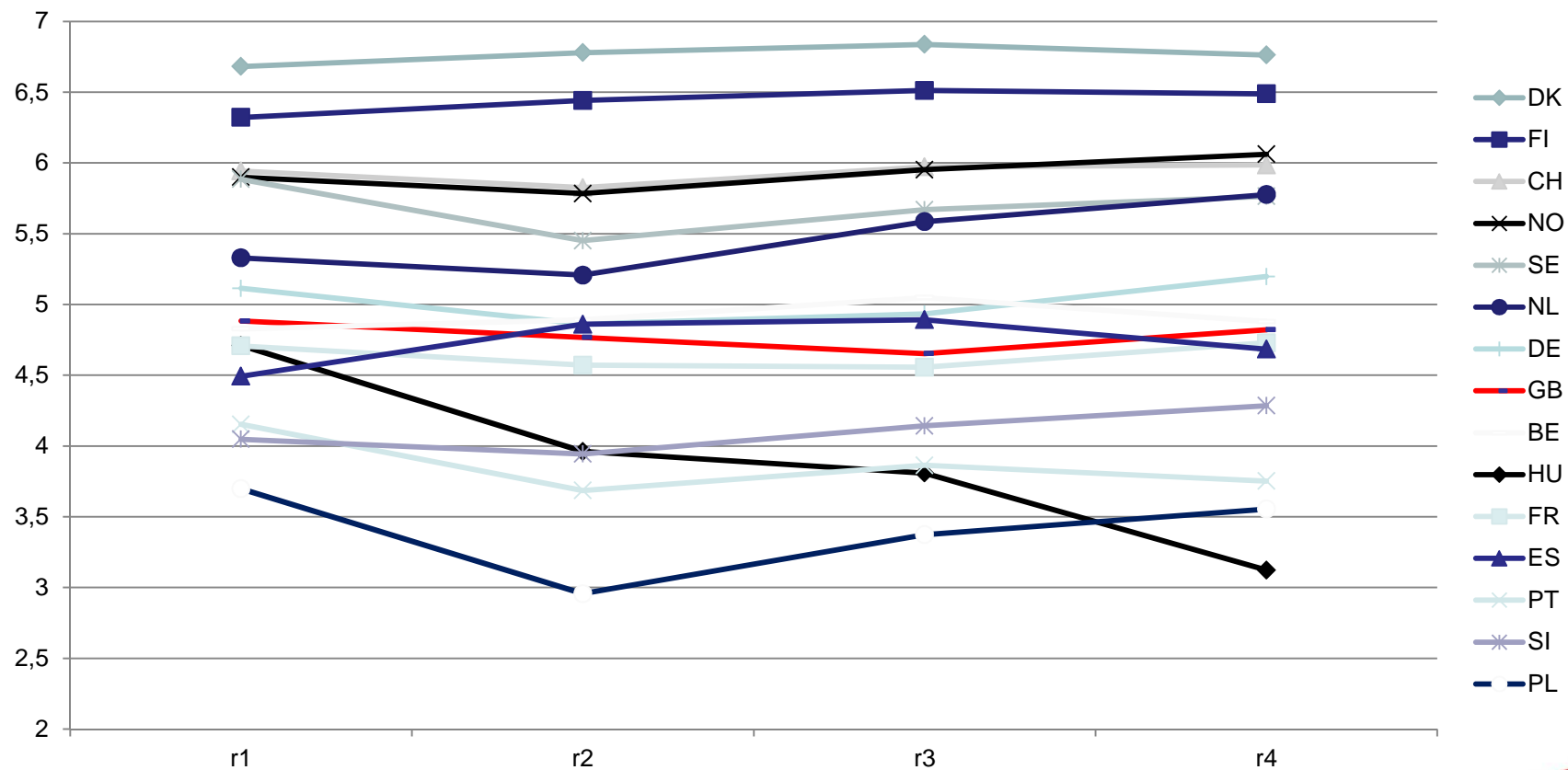
Four elements of perceived societal wellbeing

- Belief that social trust exists in society: (most people trustworthy, fair, helpful)
- Trust in political institutions (legal, parliament, police, politicians)
- Evaluation of national performance (economy, government, democracy)
- Perception of public services (health, education)

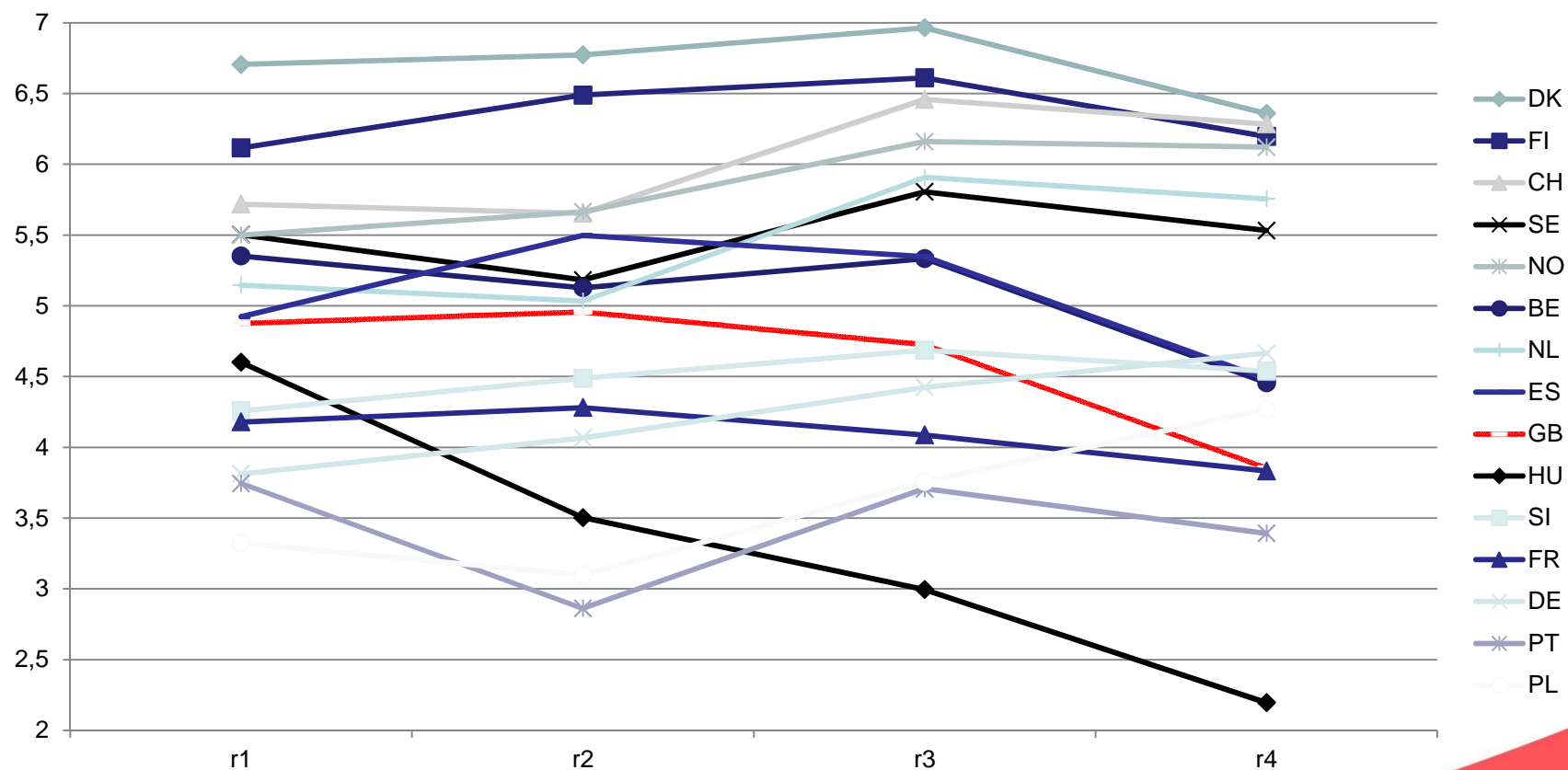
Social Trust scale 2002-2009



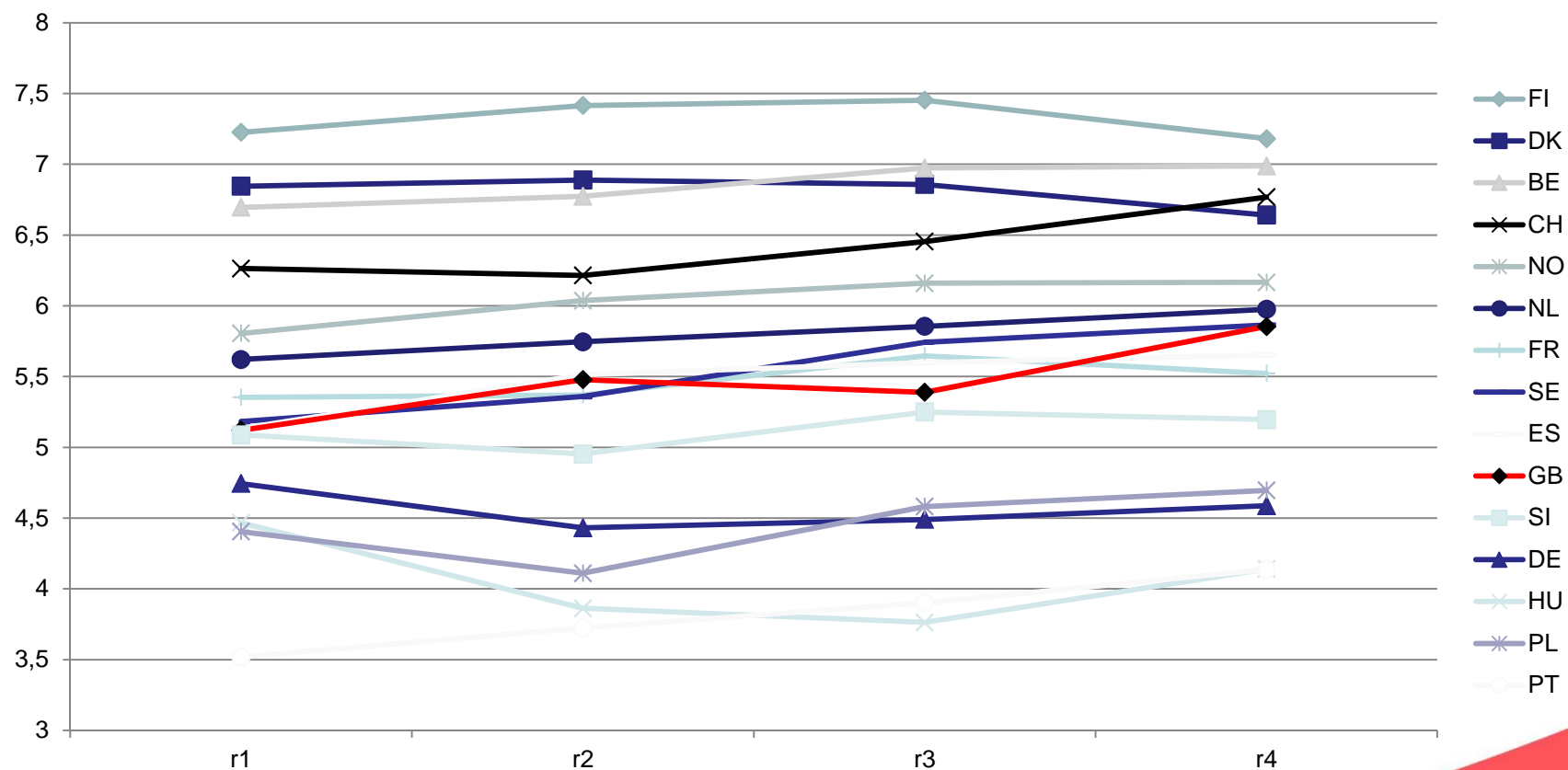
Political trust scale 2002-2009



Evaluation of national performance 2002-2009



Perceptions of public services 2002-2009



What drives levels of perceived societal wellbeing?

- Modern consensus is that ‘getting involved’ is good for individual wellbeing and good for society
- ‘Informed and engaged public citizen’ model
- Could/should there be an association between political engagement and evaluations of society?
- A. Stakeholder hypothesis: engagement correlated with higher levels of pQoS.
- B. Eye-opening hypothesis: greater understanding raises expectations and promotes critique

Three measures of political engagement:

a) Interest

B1 How interested would you say you are in politics – are you... **READ OUT...**

- very interested, 1
- quite interested, 2
- hardly interested, 3
- or, not at all interested? 4
- (Don't know) 8

We create dummy (1,2 =1)

Three measures of political engagement:

b) Vote

B11 Some people don't vote nowadays for one reason or another.

Did you vote in the last [country] national election in [month/year]?

Yes 1 **ASK B12**

No 2

Not eligible to vote 3

(Don't know) 8

This refers to the last election of a country's primary legislative assembly.

Three measures of political engagement: c) 'efficacy'

B2 CARD 6 How often does politics seem so complicated that you can't really understand what is going on?

Never 1

Seldom 2

Occasionally 3

Regularly 4

Frequently 5

(Don't know) 8

We create dummy (1,2 =1)

Analysis

- Models predicting each element of pQoS using pooled data from rounds 1-4 (n = c.122,000)
- Three main predictors, plus....
- Control variables: Country, ESS Round
- Age, Age sq, gender, education (years),
- marital status, health, religiosity, difficulty managing on income, left-right spectrum....
-and individual life satisfaction

Model 1: Social Trust ($r^2 = .23$)

- Political interest increases score on social trust score by .15 points
- Voting increases score by .25 points
- Efficacy is n.s.

- + Controls: life sat, divorce, health, education, religiosity
- - Controls: difficulty with income, right wing

Model 2: Political Trust ($r^2 = .22$)

- Political interest raises score on PT scale by .26 points
- Vote increases score by .36
- Efficacy by .13

- + Controls: divorce, health, education, life sat
- - Controls: difficulty with income, married

Model 3: Evaluation of national performance ($r^2 = .29$)

- Political interest increases performance scale score by .15 points
- Vote raises score by .14
- Efficacy adds .07

- + Controls: health, religiosity, education, divorce, life sat
- - Controls: female, difficulty with income, married, right wing

Model 4: Satisfaction with public services ($r^2 = .21$)

- Political interest reduces the public services score by .14 points.
- Neither vote nor efficacy is significant
- + Controls: divorce, life sat, health, religiosity
- - Controls: female, married, age, education

Conclusions (1)

- No general ‘plunge of a cliff’ in any of the main measures of perceived quality of society – contrary to myths
- But some interesting stories: Poland & Portugal consistently low; Hungary in decline; GB and Belgium dipping in national performance but not public services after 2007

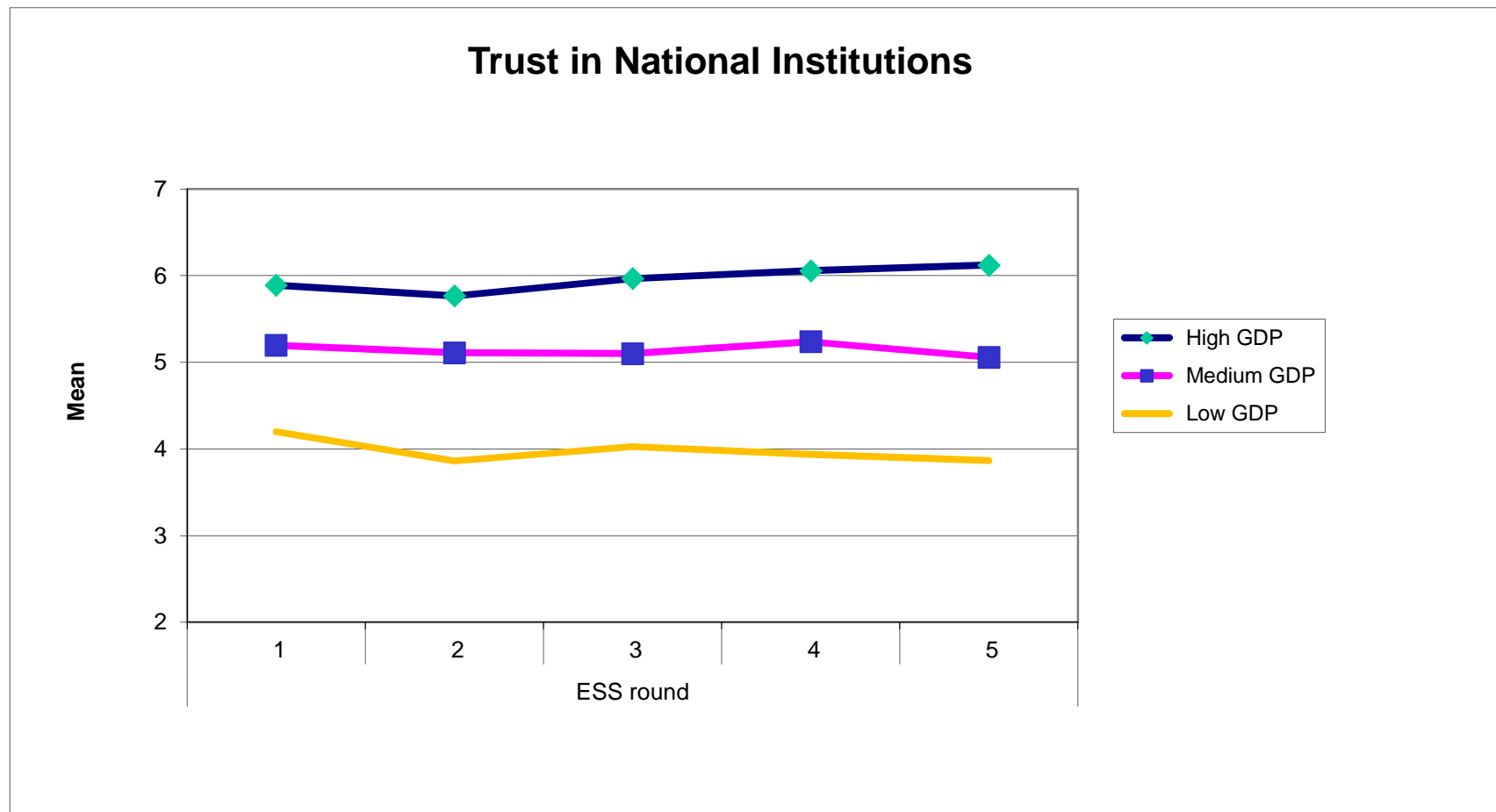
Conclusions (2)

- Drivers: some support for the ‘stakeholder argument’ in relation to social trust, political trust, evaluation of national performance
- Negative/nonexistent relationship between political engagement and satisfaction with public services
- National variables still doing most of the work – next stage should be country by country modelling

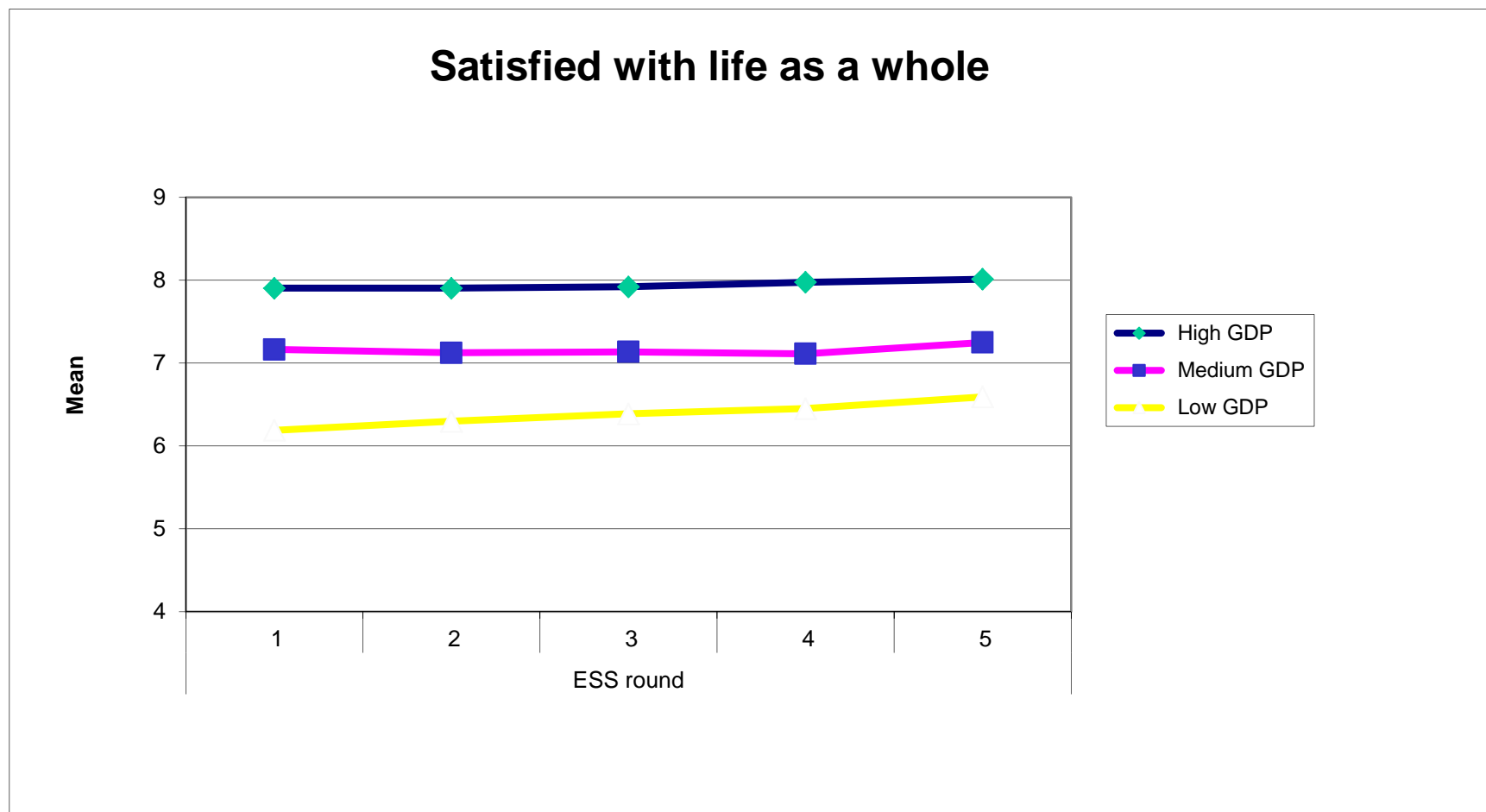
And going back to Easterlin...

- Starting point was that increases in GDP did not yield more happiness
- Yet the bulk of 'country effects' are really differences in GDP

Beyond GDP?



Maybe not



And going back to Easterlin...

- Starting point was that increases in GDP did not yield more happiness (or the good society)
- Yet the bulk of 'country effects' are really differences in GDP
- Why? Many of the things that underpin good lives and good societies (financial security, social infrastructure) require a threshold level of resources

Thanks for listening!

**Web Portal @
societalwellbeing.weebly.com**

Correspondence: eric.harrison.2@city.ac.uk