



Reporting on Deliverable D5.2 – Collection of a joint series of policy briefs (including policy recommendations)

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Collection of a joint series of policy briefs (including policy recommendations)

Executive Summary

The policy briefs emerge from the ActEU project's central aim: to understand the drivers of political trust in Europe and translate these insights into concrete guidance for policymakers. The selected topics reflect three critical dimensions of trust: top-down political agenda-setting, the protection of fundamental rights and participation, and the foundational role of subnational governance. Together, they offer a multi-level perspective on how trust is built, eroded, and reshaped across democratic systems.

A key added value of the briefs lies in how they narrow down complex research findings into clear, accessible messages tailored to policymakers at the European and national levels, while also being relevant to regional and local actors. The briefs identify important trust dynamics: populist parties can shape political agendas regardless of public demand, restrictions on protest and civic freedoms undermine democratic legitimacy, and local democratic quality has a measurable impact on citizens' confidence in national and EU institutions. These insights deepen our understanding of political trust and highlight where targeted policy interventions could have the strongest effect.

The series provides several concrete recommendations with potential EU-level relevance, including stronger safeguards for fundamental rights, greater oversight of subnational electoral standards, support for democratic innovation and participation mechanisms, and enhanced monitoring of political narratives and media framing. These measures could inform future EU legislative or non-legislative action, especially in the areas of rule-of-law monitoring, civic space protection, and democratic resilience. Ultimately, the briefs underscore that reinforcing political trust requires coordinated efforts across governance levels, and that evidence-based policymaking can meaningfully contribute to more responsive, inclusive, and legitimate democratic institutions.



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1 Introduction

1.1 Towards a new era of representative democracy – Activating European citizens' trust in times of crises and polarization (ActEU)

Trust in political institutions remains a pressing concern across the European Union. Persistent economic pressures, rising political polarization, and the rapid spread of competing narratives have contributed to declining confidence in democratic institutions and actors. These developments shape how citizens perceive politics, how they participate, and how represented they feel within decision-making processes. As a result, policymakers increasingly require concise, accessible tools that help them understand the sources of distrust and identify effective ways to address them. ActEU therefore investigated how political trust and legitimacy can be better understood and strengthened in Europe, especially amid polarization on issues like immigration, climate change and gender equality. Core research questions were: How can we conceptualize and empirically measure political trust and legitimacy beyond the usual survey question "How much trust do you have in the parliament"? Does the multi-level nature of European representative democracies require an identical level of citizen support at the regional, national and EU levels? How does social polarization on key policy issues of our times – immigration, climate change, and gender inequality – challenge the political trust in, and legitimacy of, democratic political systems? And what can policymakers and civil society do to master these challenges?

The project united European researches from Universität Duisburg-Essen (UDE, Germany, Coordinator), Universität des Saarlandes (USAAR, Germany), Paris-Lodron-Universität Salzburg (PLUS, Austria), Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA, Belgium), Ustav Mezinárodních Vztahů V.V.I. (IIR, Czech), Åbo Akademi (ÅAU, Finland), Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques (Sciences Po, France), Institut Catholique de Lille (ICL, France), Aristotelio Panepistimio Thessalonikis (AUTH, Greece), Università Degli Studi di Trento (UNITN, Italy), SWPS Uniwersytet Humanistycznospołeczny (SWPS, Poland) and Universidad de Oviedo (UNIOVI, Spain) (map of consortium members, Figure 1).

Figure 1: Consortium members of ActEU





Another key contributor to the ActEU project was the foundation of the Civil Society Network (CSN). The CSN is a diverse community of stakeholders committed to shaping Europe's future. Acting as an advisory body to the ActEU scientific team, it offers insights, expertise, and fresh perspectives. Its purpose is to help understand and counter declining political trust and legitimacy by:

- Refining research methods to ensure inclusivity and effectiveness
- Collaborating to co-create practical toolkits that address issues of political distrust
- Amplifying and disseminating research findings to reach broad audiences and support societal progress

The organizations all have their individual field of expertise. In particular these are: Multi-level governance (democratic participation, cross-border dialogue, and strengthening governance at local, national, and European levels), climate (environmental protection, climate policy, and sustainable development), migration (human rights, migration policy, and support for migrants and refugees), citizens participation (strengthen democracy by promoting civic engagement and political participation), gender equality (women's rights and anti-discrimination) and youth (represent or support young people, student mobility, and youth activism).

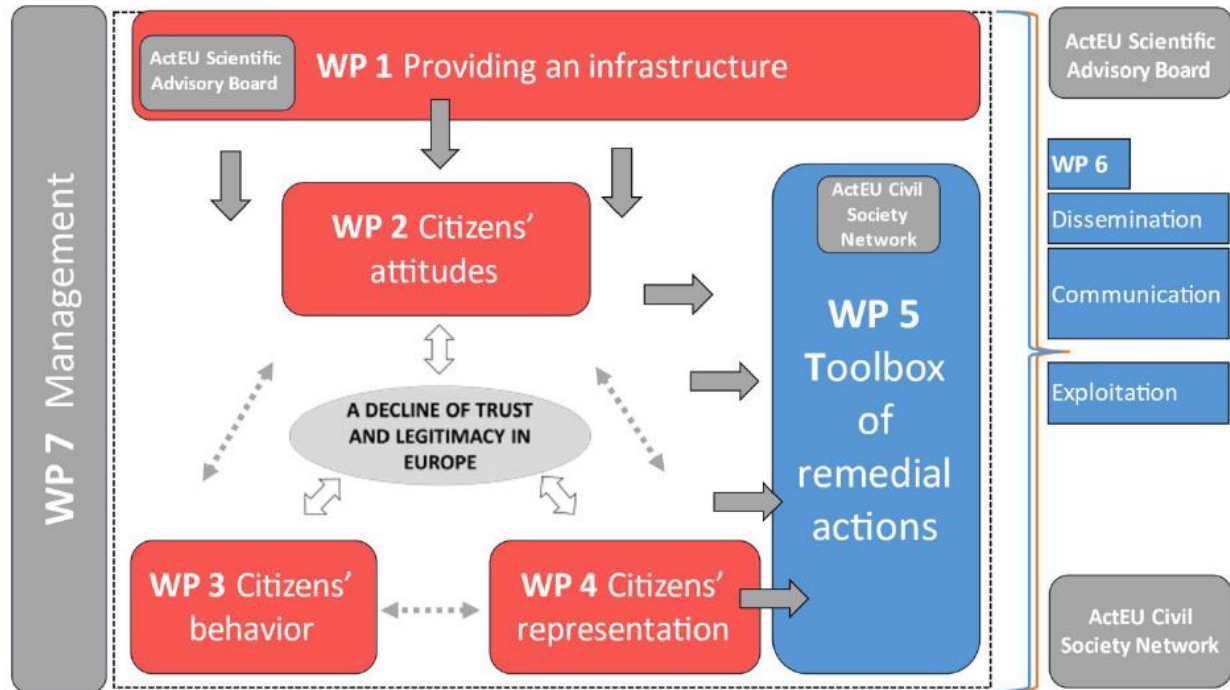
Table 1 Full list of members of the ActEU Civil Society Network

Category	Members
Multi-level governance	European Alternatives; Debating Europe; European Association for Local Democracy
Climate	Youth and Environment Europe; European Climate Foundation; World Wildlife Fund Central Eastern Europe
Migration	Euromeds Rights; Diversity Development Group; Association for Integration and Migration
Citizen's participation	Democracy International; European Citizen Action Service; Democracy Reporting International
Gender equality	International Alliance of Women; Hungarian Women's Lobby; Gender At Work
Youth	De Kiesmannen; Young European Federalists; European Student's Union; Erasmus Student Network

More generally, ActEU aimed at finding answers to these questions pursuing two overarching goals. In Phase 1, we mapped and investigated persistent problems of declining trust, legitimacy, and representation in Europe, with particular attention to the polarization of societies and the EU's multi-level structures. By providing an innovative conceptual framework on political attitudes, participation, and representation across Europe, we established an original empirical infrastructure based on a novel combination of methods and newly collected quantitative and qualitative empirical data (focus groups, experimental surveys, web scraping). In Phase 2, these results flowed directly into the creation of a toolbox of remedial actions to enhance political trust in and the legitimacy of European representative democracies. In cooperation with ActEU's CSN, Youth Democracy Labs across 13 European cities, and exchanges with political cartoonists, we developed context-sensitive solutions for all polity levels focused on polarizing policy areas, and crafted

toolkits for policymakers, civil society, and the educational sector. Finally, TEPSA developed and implemented a differentiated dissemination strategy to maximize ActEU's scientific, policy, and societal impact (Figure 2).

Figure 2: ActEU project structure



Under Work package 5 (Toolbox of remedial actions), ActEU focused on the following objectives to meet these aims:

- O5.1 Cooperate with members of the ActEU Civil Society Network in developing methodologies for enhancing trust in representative democracy, boosting transparency, representativeness and inclusiveness of representative systems (taking into account specific geographical regional, generational features based on previous research outputs of the project).
- O5.2 Motivate European youth to participate in discussions addressing the future of Europe and its resilience via ActEU Youth Democracy Labs.
- O5.3 Create a toolkit for policymakers at the European, national, regional and local level with context-sensitive policy recommendations to address issues of declining trust in representative democracy.
- O5.4 Create a toolkit for civil society and the educational sector with a set of educational cartoons as well as teaching materials for school teachers and other actors in the field of citizenship education in order to foster the participation of young citizens and strengthen their (feelings of) representation.

This deliverable addresses O5.3 and the policy briefs that form part of the tailored dissemination strategy, which aims to increase ActEU's scientific, societal and policy impact, as well as helping to



activate citizens' trust in representative democracy. The project deliverable, D5.2, relates to the following task as described in the ActEU Grant Agreement:

T5.3 Toolkit for policymakers (lead: USAAR, partners: all, except for UNIOVI; M23–35)

A joint series of policy briefs written by consortium members, with short- and long-term recommendations for policymakers at the EU, national, regional, and local level. The topics of the series included macro factors that erode trust and measures to counteract them, on the connection between trust and modes of participation and measures to engage with new forms of participation, and on patterns of representation and trust and measures to improve subjective representation. In the following chapter the idea behind the policy briefs and more detailed information about the addressed target audience will be highlighted.

1.2.1 The Purpose of Policy Briefs

In general, policy briefs play a crucial role in connecting research with real-world policymaking. Their purpose is to translate complex evidence into clear, concise, and actionable recommendations that decision-makers can use quickly. They highlight key findings, explain why they matter, and outline practical steps for governments, EU institutions, and civil society. Policy briefs also help ensure that research reaches a broader audience, including policymakers, practitioners, journalists, and engaged citizens, by presenting insights in an accessible, solution-oriented format. They serve as a bridge between academic research and effective, informed public policy.

Policy briefs are a tool for translating independent, evidence-based research into accessible and actionable guidance for policymakers, especially in democratic contexts marked by distrust and political polarisation. Their core purpose is to bridge the gap between complex academic research and real-world policy processes by presenting findings in a clear, concise, and politically legitimate format. They are designed to make research socially resonant, methodologically credible, and relevant to diverse audiences.

There is also a strategic communicative role which effective policy briefs can provide. They provide accessible summaries of research that can be easily shared, read quickly by busy policymakers, and adapted into various formats such as infographics, newsletters, and audiovisual content. Their purpose extends beyond policymakers to the wider public: they help citizens understand key issues, connect research to real-life concerns, and empower broader participation in democratic processes. In this sense, they contribute to inclusive communication, counteracting the fragmentation of today's information environment.

Finally, policy briefs form part of a broader impact and influence strategy. They help build long-term relationships with policy actors, serve as entry points for deeper engagement, and generate the visibility necessary to shape policy thinking over time. Effective policy briefs are also monitored for their reach and influence, allowing researchers to adjust their communication strategies and strengthen the cumulative, relational impact needed for evidence to inform democratic governance. In sum, policy briefs are an essential mechanism for ensuring that independent research remains credible, relevant, and impactful in shaping policies and supporting democratic resilience (Evans et al., 2025)

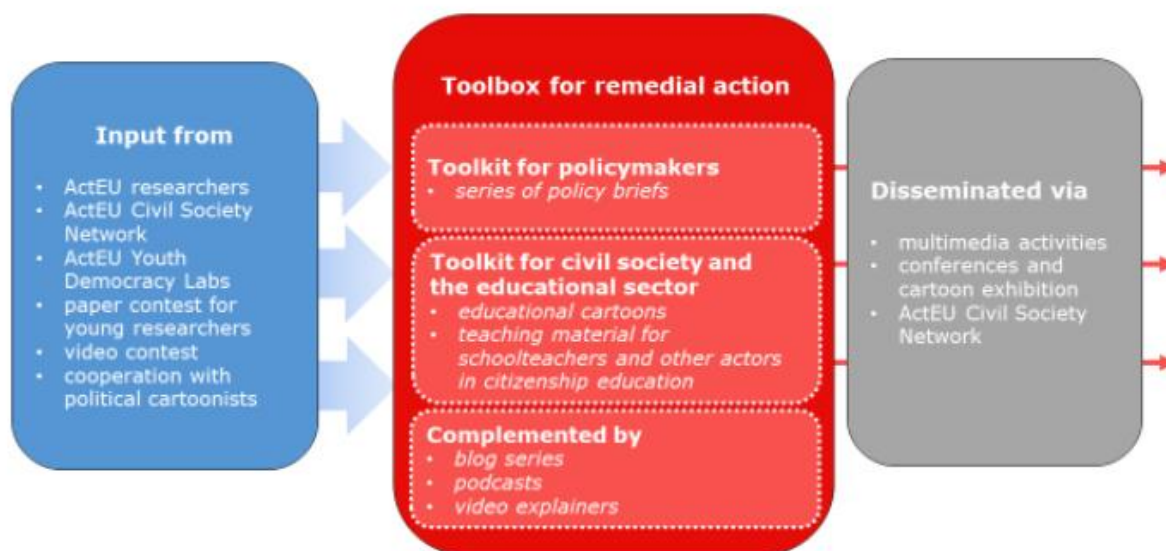
1.2.2 Aim of the Policy Briefs as part of ActEU's dissemination communication and exploitation

At the beginning of the project, ActEU's objective was to produce a joint series of policy briefs offering practical recommendations for policymakers at the European, national, regional, and local levels. The series was intended to address three central dimensions of political trust:

- macro-level factors contributing to declining trust and potential measures to counteract them
- the relationship between trust and emerging modes of political participation
- patterns of representation and citizens' subjective sense of being represented

These policy briefs were conceived as part of a broader toolkit complemented by a second toolkit for civil society and the educational sector designed to support engagement and strengthen political trust, particularly among young citizens. Figure 3 illustrates this process of the threefold strategy for remedial action (Fig.3).

Figure 3: ActEU's toolbox for remedial action



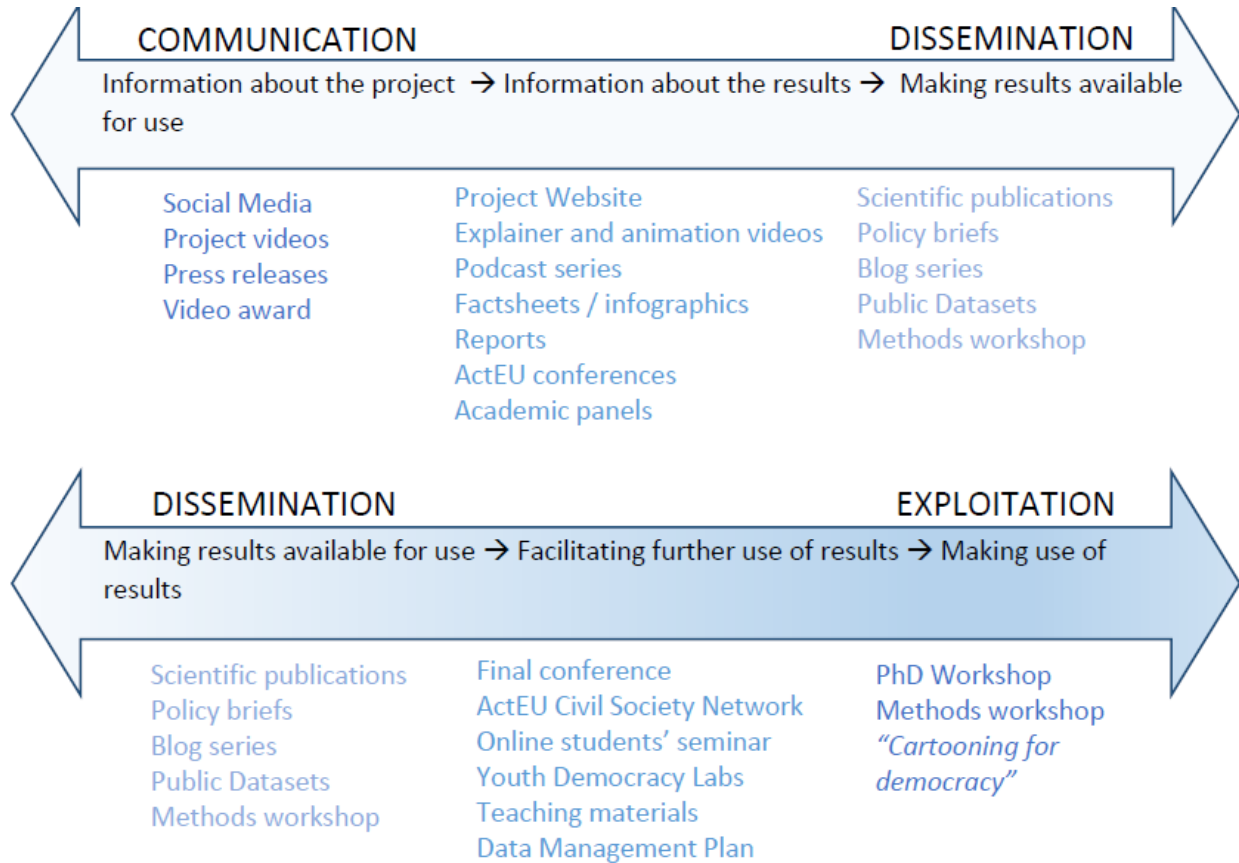
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As the ActEU project advanced, the insights generated through its research guided the direction of the policy brief series. While the briefs remain relevant across all levels of governance, the empirical findings highlighted that the most actionable and clearly articulated recommendations pertain to the national and European levels, where institutional responsibilities and policy leverage are greatest in relation to the issues examined. This natural fine-tuning allowed the series to remain grounded in the project's evidence while ensuring that the recommendations are both realistic and impactful.

The policy briefs are part of ActEU's communication, dissemination and exploitation activities (Fig. 4). Communication focuses on raising awareness about the project itself through accessible formats such as social media, videos, and public-facing materials. Dissemination centres on making research results available so others can understand and benefit from them, typically through scientific publications, datasets, workshops, and especially concise, user-friendly outputs. Exploitation goes a

step further by ensuring that these results are actively taken up and used in practice through training, teaching materials, and applied workshops. Policy briefs belong to the dissemination stage, where research findings are translated into practical, accessible recommendations for policymakers and other stakeholders.

Figure 4 ActEU's communication, dissemination and exploitation activities



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The final policy briefs address three distinct but interconnected aspects of political trust identified throughout the ActEU research:

- the protection of fundamental democratic rights, with a specific emphasis on safeguarding the right to protest as a key component of democratic expression
- the salience of topics promoted by populist parties, examining how these actors elevate particular issues and frame them as crucial to the public agenda, thereby shaping public perceptions and influencing levels of trust
- the local foundations of citizens' trust, demonstrating how everyday interactions with local governance and politicians form the basis for broader attitudes toward national and European institutions

The focus of final series evolved and remains fully aligned with the project's overarching goal: to deliver clear, concise, and empirically grounded recommendations that help policymakers at all governance levels better understand and respond to the dynamics shaping political trust in Europe today.



1.3 Target Audience

The policy brief series is designed primarily to inform policymakers by translating the project's research findings into clear, actionable insights that can shape ongoing debates and support evidence-based decision-making. While the main audience consists of officials at the European and national levels, the briefs also aim to be relevant for regional and local administrations working on issues related to political trust and democratic participation. Beyond policymakers, the series is accessible for a broader set of stakeholders (including civil society organizations, educators, and interested citizens) by using clear, non-technical language that allows non-academic readers to engage with the findings. In this way, the briefs not only contribute to policy development but also help broaden public understanding of the factors that shape trust in democratic institutions. While policymakers remain the central target group, effective policy influence depends on reaching a wider ecosystem of actors (Table 2).

Table 2: Target Groups of Policy Briefs

Target Group	Why They Matter	How Policy Briefs Serve Them
Policymakers & Public Institutions	Shape laws, policies, and governance; need quick, credible guidance.	Provide concise evidence, actionable recommendations, and clarity for time-pressed decision-making.
Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)	Mobilise citizens, advocate for rights, monitor institutions.	Supply authoritative evidence for advocacy, consultations, and accountability efforts.
Researchers, Think Tanks & Experts	Produce knowledge, advise policymakers, set agendas.	Create shared evidence bases, encourage expert dialogue, and support transdisciplinary cooperation.
Media & Information Actors	Influence public opinion; shape understanding of policy issues.	Offer reliable facts, simplify complexity, counter misinformation, support accurate reporting.
Citizens & General Public	Democratic legitimacy depends on informed, engaged citizens.	Translate research into accessible language; build trust; encourage participation in democracy.
Youth & Marginalised Groups	Often excluded from policy discussions but crucial for long-term democratic resilience.	Use inclusive communication; connect policy issues to lived experience; support empowerment.
Digital & Social Media Communities	Consume news via algorithms; shape narratives quickly.	Adapt briefs into visuals, infographics, short videos, and accessible online formats.

Evans et al., 2025

Beyond government, civil society organisations (CSOs) are a crucial secondary audience. CSOs often translate policy recommendations into public advocacy, mobilise citizens, monitor institutional compliance, and act as democratic intermediaries. For them, policy briefs serve as authoritative evidence that strengthens advocacy strategies, supports participation in consultations, and helps hold governments accountable.



Researchers, think tanks, and academic communities are also important targets. Policy briefs help align research agendas, open channels for expert dialogue, and create a shared evidence base within the policy ecosystem. These actors act as multipliers, further amplifying the brief's messages.

Because democratic debate depends on an informed public sphere, media and information actors are also key audiences. Policy briefs supply verified, digestible evidence that can correct misperceptions, counter misinformation, and facilitate accurate reporting. Their clarity makes them attractive communication tools for fast-paced news cycles.

Crucially, policy briefs should also address citizens and the general public, not just institutional elites. Citizens influence policy indirectly through public opinion, civic engagement, and democratic pressure. Briefs that communicate clearly, relate to everyday experiences, and use inclusive language help build trust and strengthen democratic participation. This includes reaching younger audiences and marginalised groups who often feel excluded from policy discussions.

In today's digitalised political arena, policy briefs must also consider online communities and social media users. Algorithms shape how people access information, amplifying both expertise and misinformation. By adapting briefs into platform-specific formats, such as visuals, carousels, or short videos, researchers can widen outreach and ensure their work circulates where public debate increasingly takes place.

Together, these groups form an interconnected audience landscape. Policy briefs therefore serve not one target, but an entire democratic ecosystem, ensuring that evidence can influence policymaking, inform public dialogue, empower civil society, and ultimately strengthen democratic trust and resilience.

1.4 Complementary Communication Strategies: Blog posts

A blog series, with contributions by project researchers, focusing especially on the relevance of ActEU's research for EU-level institutions was hosted by "Der (europäische) Föderalist", a prominent EU policy blog in German and English with a special interest in supranational representative democracy. "Der (europäische) Föderalist" reaches both an expert audience (policymakers, academics, media) and a broader public, especially younger activists from civil society organizations.

Unlike typical policy briefs, which are usually short, technical, and solution-focused, the blog provides deeper political and constitutional context. It explores *why* issues matter, how they developed historically, and how they relate to broader trends in European integration. It provides deeper political and historical context, highlights the democratic and constitutional implications of EU governance, and connects its analysis directly to current debates and events. The blog also adds comparative insights across EU member states and uniquely publishes European Parliament seat projections based on national polls. Through guest contributions and interviews, it incorporates diverse perspectives, and its clear, narrative style makes complex issues accessible to both experts and an interested general audience. ActEU's contributions are summarized in Table 3. The publication of the series is scheduled to begin in January 2026. In the appendix of this deliverable the current drafts of the full versions of the blog entries and additional details about the authors are given.

Table 3: List of all blog posts with authors and titles

Authors	Title
Henrik Serup Christensen and Janette Huttunen (ÅAU)	Economic deprivation reduces political trust
Alexander Hoppe (UDE)	ActEU Democracy Labs: A young perspective on politics and political education in the EU
Felix-Christopher von Nostitz (ICL)	Multi-level democracy and political trust in Europe: The role of the subnational level
Louisa Parks (UNITN)	What's trust got to do with it? Political trust, polarized opinions and climate protest in Europe
Ermela Gianna, Matilde Ceron and Zoe Lefkofridi (PLUS)	From seats to sentiments: what Austria teaches us about trust and representation in a multi-level Europe
Alex Hartland, Daniela Braun, Giuseppe Carteny, Rosa M. Navarrete, & Ann-Kathrin Reinl (USAAR)	Out of Step? The EU's Difficult Election Dance

1.4.1 Economic deprivation reduces political trust by Henrik Serup Christensen and Janette Huttunen

Political trust is essential for stable and legitimate democracies, but levels of trust vary widely across social groups and over time. While factors such as age, gender, education, migrant background, and social class all relate to trust, their individual effects are often small once other variables are considered. The strongest and most consistent predictor of political trust, at national, European, and regional levels, is subjective economic security, specifically how easily people feel they can get by on their household income.

Using data from the European Social Survey (2002–2023), the ActEU project finds that people who struggle financially consistently show lower political trust than those who feel economically comfortable. This pattern appears in all European countries and has become more pronounced over time. Economic hardship thus significantly undermines trust in political institutions.

The findings highlight that feelings of economic insecurity, not just objective income levels, play a key role. To strengthen political trust, policies must enhance people's economic security through equitable growth, affordable basic goods and services, stable prices, and strong welfare systems. Without addressing economic hardship, sustaining trust, and thereby the legitimacy of democratic systems, will be increasingly difficult.

1.4.2 ActEU Democracy Labs: A young perspective on politics and political education in the EU by Alexander Hoppe

The ActEU research project examines political participation, representation, polarization, and trust in the EU, issues especially relevant for young Europeans. Recognizing that young people are often talked about rather than talked with, the project created Youth Democracy Labs across several European countries to gather young people's views and policy recommendations on the EU political system and political education. Over 300 young participants produced more than 400 recommendations.

The labs showed that young Europeans are politically interested and willing to engage when given meaningful, participatory formats. However, they also revealed significant concerns, including the



need for more participation and influence, better access to political information, and major reform of political education.

Improving political education requires long-term cooperation among political actors, universities, and schools, though short-term actions, like more engagement between politicians, academics, and students, are possible now. The ActEU project contributes by developing a toolkit with educational resources, workshops, and materials based on the findings from the Youth Democracy Labs. These labs demonstrate that involving young people directly in research and political education can strengthen their preparation for active European citizenship.

1.4.3 Multi-level democracy and political trust in Europe: The role of the subnational level by Felix-Christopher von Nostitz

This blog post examines how democratic institutions at the subnational (regional and local) level shape political trust within the EU's multi-level system. While the EU is widely described as a system of multilevel governance, its democratic functioning across these levels remains underexplored.

Using data from the Eurobarometer, V-Dem, and the European Social Survey (2019–2023), the researchers analyze how subnational autonomy and subnational democratic quality affect citizens' trust in political institutions at the regional, national, and EU levels. They find that trust in institutions is interconnected, subnational autonomy has mixed effects, and subnational democratic quality consistently boosts trust.

Both subnational autonomy and democratic quality raise trust in regional institutions, but democratic quality is a stronger and more consistently positive predictor of overall political trust. Autonomy may create tensions across levels of governance, but strong, transparent, and participatory democratic processes at the subnational level reinforce trust throughout the political system. Prioritize improving democratic quality at the subnational level through transparent elections, participatory governance, and protection of civil liberties. Balance regional autonomy with broader systemic cohesion to maintain trust in national and EU institutions and strengthen Europe's multi-level democracy.

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1.4.4 What's trust got to do with it? Political trust, polarized opinions and climate protest in Europe by Louisa Parks

Research on climate-related polarization in Europe often assumes a divide between climate "deniers" and "believers," but this oversimplifies public opinion. Most Europeans accept human-driven climate change; disagreement centers instead on climate policies: how fast, how costly, and who should pay. The ActEU project therefore examines polarization through a more realistic lens: climate justice supporters vs. climate skeptics (a broader category including denialists and those questioning the harm, causes, or policy responses to climate change).

Using exploratory analyses of X (Twitter) accounts and ActEU survey data, the study investigates how these two groups differ in political trust and protest participation. Environmentalists as a whole do not show clear trust or distrust patterns. But mainstream environmental groups (e.g., WWF, BirdLife) tend to express more political trust and fewer distrustful messages. Climate justice groups (e.g., Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion) express more political distrust, often portraying political actors as dishonest or incompetent. This distrust would be hidden if all environmentalists were treated as a single group. Climate skeptic accounts, surprisingly, express more political trust and fewer distrustful messages than expected. They are often linked to far right



or populist actors, though their climate skepticism varies. This challenges the assumption that climate skeptics inherently distrust political actors.

The EU's legitimacy depends partly on its response: It should open channels of inclusion for protest claims, and it should oppose repression of climate justice protests. Right-wing-linked climate skeptic protests challenge EU authority, while climate justice movements, though aligned with EU climate ambitions, are increasingly disengaging from the EU, seeing it as ineffective. This may fuel their distrust of political institutions.

1.4.5 From seats to sentiments: what Austria teaches us about trust and representation in a multi-level Europe by Ermela Gianna, Matilde Ceron and Zoe Lefkofridi

Austria presents a paradox relevant across Europe: its parliament has become more diverse and attentive to equality issues, yet many citizens still feel underrepresented and show only moderate trust in political institutions. Using data from the ActEU project, the blog post examines how objective representation (who is in parliament and what issues they address) interacts with subjective feelings of representation and trust across local, national, and European levels.

Descriptive representation in Austria's Nationalrat has improved: more women (41%), more LGBTQI+ MPs, and more representatives with migration backgrounds (though still below population share). Youth and lower-educated groups remain underrepresented. Substantive representation is uneven: parliamentary questions focus heavily on gender equality and climate change, while migration and minority issues receive far less attention. This reveals selective responsiveness. Though perceptions are mixed: over 10% feel not represented at all, one-third feel only "somewhat" represented, and just 20% feel well represented.

Representation must be coordinated across levels. Trust will not naturally "flow" from national to EU institutions or vice versa if citizens experience inconsistent recognition across arenas. Agenda breadth is crucial. Selective responsiveness leaves gaps that populist or anti-system actors can exploit (especially around migration or social inequality).

Austria illustrates Europe's broader challenge: representation is expanding, yet trust is uneven. Strengthening legitimacy requires linking institutional inclusion to citizens' lived experiences of being heard.

1.4.6 Out of Step? The EU's Difficult Election Dance by Alex Hartland, Daniela Braun, Giuseppe Carteny, Rosa M. Navarrete, & Ann-Kathrin Reinl

The study examines how well political parties in the 2024 European Parliament elections aligned their campaign priorities with what voters actually cared about, and whether voters rewarded responsive parties. Using ActEU data from nine countries, it finds a substantial mismatch between voter concerns and party manifesto attention across key issues: the economy, migration, the environment, defence, and the EU itself.

Parties and voters focus on different issues. When parties talk about what voters care about, voters reward them. Misalignment between the two creates risks, however. When mainstream parties ignore high-salience issues like migration, they leave space for extremist or populist parties to dominate the narrative. Research shows copying far-right positions doesn't work, but failing to offer alternative framing also carries costs.



Parties face a strategic dilemma, addressing controversial issues may alienate some supporters, but silence can push voters toward more extreme alternatives. Given the cross-border nature of challenges like migration, climate change, and defence, the EU must show citizens the concrete benefits of coordinated action. Campaign communication should be less about abstract “Europe” and more about practical outcomes for voters.

1.5 Complementary Communication Strategies: Sister projects

Ten other research projects, funded by either Horizon Europe or Horizon 2020, share ActEU's research interests. These 'sister projects' pursue similar overarching goals, such as strengthening political trust and counteracting its decline, as well as that of populism and polarisation. To ensure a more holistic approach to our policy recommendations, we analysed the sister projects' previous contributions, compared them to our own findings in terms of similarities and differences, and attempted to align the way in which they communicate to the target groups.

In this section, we focus on the most relevant contributions to our policy briefs, summarising them and highlighting their relevance and influence. Among the plethora of policy briefs contributed by the sister projects, we focus on the most comparable ones in regard of these topics. To this end, we have only selected policy briefs that are directly relevant to the ActEU's policy briefs addressed by this deliverable, concerning theoretical and empirical contributions to the concept of political trust and the dynamics between different levels of governance (emphasising the importance of bottom-up trust-building), as well as elite-driven, top-down agenda-setting by populist actors (highlighting the need for better voter education on political framing).

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1.5.1 Policy, Expertise and Trust (PERITIA)



PERITIA (2020 to 2023) received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 870883. The project explored public trust in expertise. The interdisciplinary team examined how emotional and normative factors shape decisions to trust, even when these appear to rely on professional competence. Using climate change as a test case, PERITIA developed practical tools and indicators to assess the trustworthiness of experts and institutions involved in social and political decision-making.

Key policy briefs

Trends in Trust D8.6 Briefing Note

Peritia analysed secondary data across five major surveys European Social Survey (ESS) • International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) • Eurobarometer (EB) • European Values Survey (EVS) • World Values Survey (WVS). Trust in institutions across Europe has remained largely stable over the past two decades, following earlier declines up to the late 1990s. However, country-level trends show some divergence, with a few nations experiencing rising confidence in national parliaments and political parties (Hewlett et. Al, 2023a).



Similar to ACTEU, the project stated that collected data on trust or confidence in institutions, differ substantially in their measures, question formats, and response scales. Because comparable cross-country data on trust in experts and scientists is limited, Peritia focused mainly on institutional trust.

PERITIA Briefs & Reports. D8.6 Briefing Report: Measuring trust in social surveys

Another policy brief of Peritia provided concrete recommendations on how to measure trust in surveys. Improving trust measurement requires acknowledging the difficulty of simplifying complex concepts, cultural differences in interpretation, and the trade-off between specificity and broad relevance, while designing surveys that make informed methodological choices. PERITIA's work shows that philosophical dimensions of trust—such as reliance, competence, and normative expectations—are highly correlated in practice, meaning that combining multiple trust questions into a single composite measure provides the most reliable and valid way to assess trust in different actors (Hewlett et al., 2023b).

How this influenced the ActEU policy briefs

The policy briefs developed under PERITIA shaped the approach of ActEU in how to communicate research via policy briefs. PERITIA offered a thorough example of how empirical social-science questions such as “How to measure trust?” can be framed for non-academic audiences, explained in terms of their importance for social research and relevance to wider society. This approach particularly influenced ActEU's policy briefs “Rebuilding Trust from the Ground Up: Strengthening Subnational Governance to Reinforce Democratic Legitimacy” and “How to Rebuild Public Trust: The Influence of Non-Electoral Participation in Europe”, as both highlight that political trust in Europe varies by governance level and is not uniformly distributed. Thus, beyond mere thematic overlap (trust), ActEU was able to draw on the practical groundwork laid by PERITIA and adopted a shared philosophy of translating scientific insights into society-relevant and policy-oriented communications.

PERITIA concentrated on trust in expertise and science-policy relationships and ActEU focuses on political trust, legitimacy, and multi-level governance in democracies. While PERITIA conducted citizen deliberations, developed toolkits and policy briefs on trustworthiness of expertise, ActEU combines surveys, focus groups, social-media analysis and toolkits for policy stakeholders. Both value turning research into accessible formats for policy and public audiences; PERITIA's policy briefs laid out how to simplify complexity while retaining rigor, and ActEU adopted this logic when crafting its own briefs. In sum, the relationship between the two projects exemplifies how one research initiative's communication strategy (PERITIA) can inform and strengthen another's (ActEU), allowing ActEU to build on existing best-practice in reliably and effectively reaching policy actors and society at large.

1.5.2 Reclaiming Liberal Democracy in the Postfactual Age (RECLAIM)





The Reclaiming Liberal Democracy in the Postfactual Age (RECLAIM) is a three-year research project (2022–2025) funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe program. Bringing together a consortium of researchers from thirteen partner universities across Europe, the project investigates how post-truth politics shapes the future of liberal democracy on the continent. Its goals are to (a) develop theoretically and empirically grounded visions for the future of liberal democratic institutions, (b) reconsider the meaning and role of liberal democracy in 21st-century Europe, and (c) create recommendations, toolkits, narratives, and methodologies that help restore the legitimacy and effectiveness of liberal democratic systems.

Key policy briefs

RECLAIM Policy Brief - Protecting Quality Journalism and Media Freedom

The study combines a cross-national survey and in-depth interviews. The survey, conducted in Norway, Italy, and Poland, tested citizens' expectations of journalism and their trust in different writing styles. Respondents were shown both tabloid-style and broadsheet-style versions of the same news story; most preferred and trusted the version that followed professional journalistic standards such as objectivity, accuracy, and contextualisation. Complementing the survey, interviews with journalists in seven countries (Norway, Iceland, Poland, Italy, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Spain) explored the challenges journalists face in producing high-quality news. Journalists across these diverse contexts identified similar obstacles: accelerated news cycles, political polarisation, concentrated media ownership, and dependence on unregulated digital platforms. Despite shared concerns, their views on what the EU should do about disinformation varied widely within—rather than between—countries. Many also noted that professional fact-checkers play a valuable role by strengthening journalists' ability to identify disinformation and fake news. The independence and freedom of the media must be ensured by protecting professional journalism from unchecked market pressures and undue state influence (Moland et. Al, 2025).

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RECLAIM Policy Paper on New and Student-Centred Education Tools

Drawing on comparative evidence from case studies in Italy, Bavaria, Iceland, Croatia and Bulgaria, this policy brief identifies structural weaknesses in Civic Education across Europe. Splitting Civic and Citizenship Education makes both overly abstract and detached from students' real lives, undermining schools' ability to foster active citizenship. In practice, civic learning remains weak: many teachers lack training, support, and time, and schools often depend on individual initiative rather than institutional backing. This creates a clear gap between curricular ambitions and everyday teaching. Because the EU has no regulatory authority in education and responsibilities are dispersed nationally and locally, top-down reform is not feasible. Instead, progress depends on empowering teachers and students directly. Existing pilot projects point in this direction but require scaling and systematization. The proposed European School Navigator aims to meet this need. Linked to e-Twinning, it offers a Teacher's Toolkit for lesson design and peer collaboration, alongside student-focused Media and Civic Lab modules that make civic learning interactive and digital. Despite limited EU powers, targeted digital tools can meaningfully strengthen civic education. The Navigator represents a practical first step toward modernizing Europe's learning infrastructure for future democratic challenges (Castiglioni & Chiriatti, 2025).

How this influenced the ActEU policy briefs

The policy recommendations by RECLAIM supplement ours in so far as both highlight the importance of public opinion formation. Even if not explicitly mentioned, RECLAIM also contributed to questions of mechanism for political polarization. This is particularly important as complementary insight regarding our policy brief "Who speaks loudest? The real drivers behind political polarization", which highlights the agenda-setting role of populist parties when it comes to



shaping the importance of issues such as immigration by framing. Elaborated and independent public service media might contribute to counter this asymmetry between the importance of topics for voters and the salience of immigration in political communication of populists' parties in traditional and social media. In this sense, the recommendations of RECLAIM are also very valuable additions to counteract the creation of echo chambers around the topic, amplifying populist narratives. The second policy brief also offers some detailed recommendations to foster civic learning in schools, which also overlaps with our finding, that educating voters on how political narratives are constructed and spread as well as encouraging open, inclusive public debate on contested topics, could help reshape the agenda setting from the bottom-up.

1.5.3 Democratic Efficacy and the Varieties of Populism in Europe (DEMOS)



Democratic Efficacy and the Varieties of Populism in Europe (DEMOS) is a research and innovation project studying populism and its impacts on democracy. Funded by the EU Horizon 2020 Framework Programme, the project is carried out by 15 partner institutions in Europe and involves 10 scientific disciplines. DEMOS investigates the phenomenon of populism through the lenses of democratic efficacy. The idea combines attitudinal features (political efficacy), political skills, knowledge, and democratic opportunity structures. A novelty, democratic efficacy is understood as a condition of political engagement needed to address the challenges of populism.

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Key policy briefs

Although DEMOS produced many interesting policy briefs, we have chosen to highlight this one as it summarises all the project's key findings and recommendations.

Varieties of Populism and Democratic Efficacy: Summary of Key Findings and Recommendations from DEMOS.

The DEMOS project highlights that populism takes different forms across Europe but consistently threatens democratic institutions, requiring tailored and well-targeted policy responses. It stresses that populist leaders often centralize power and weaken checks and balances; therefore, national governments should reinforce institutional safeguards by limiting presidential mandates, restricting frequent referenda, tightening constitutional amendment procedures, and strengthening parliamentary oversight. Ensuring fair political competition is also essential. This includes maintaining stable and transparent electoral rules, guaranteeing equitable access to campaign resources, reducing polarisation, and developing communication strategies that counter populist narratives without deepening divisions. Because populist communication thrives on disinformation and emotional appeal, the project underscores the need to strengthen media literacy. Citizens require critical thinking skills, fact-checking tools, and modern news literacy programmes, while policymakers must work with social media platforms to address hate speech and support independent, high-integrity journalism. Democratic politicians should respond to public concerns without adopting populist rhetoric. Enhancing citizens' political efficacy is equally



important. This involves investing in civic education, anti-bullying measures, media literacy, and quality journalism, as well as supporting teachers and schools in addressing politicised issues. More opportunities for citizen participation and stronger support for civil society organisations are also needed. Finally, DEMOS calls for better research tools to track populism's evolution, including improved survey measures of political knowledge, media use, and civic skills, and greater attention to emotional dynamics in public communication across media and political actors (Sotiropoulos & Boda, 2022).

How this influenced the ActEU policy briefs

The policy recommendations by DEMOS carried important findings that influenced more nuanced understandings of populism within the ActEU project. Especially the insight, that democratic politicians should respond to public concerns without adopting populist rhetoric, is a shared finding that we also communicate in our policy brief "Who speaks loudest? The real drivers behind political polarization" where we advise mainstream parties to develop programmatic responses and stimulate broader public debate to offer voters real choices

Even though ActEU differs from DEMOS by focusing much more on political trust, elite-driven framing, and how narratives - not issues themselves - shape polarization and populist support, some communalities are clearly visible: Both projects stress that populist leaders shape political agendas from the top down, especially on emotionally charged topics such as immigration, gender, and climate. Populist influence grows not because citizens prioritize these issues, but because populists frame them forcefully and dominate public debate. DEMOS highlights the need for stronger institutional safeguards, while ActEU shows that populists strategically set the agenda on divisive topics regardless of public demand. Both projects emphasise the risks of emotionalised political discourse and the importance of countering it. Enhanced monitoring of how political messages and frames spread across media. More cross-national research to track evolving narratives, emotional dynamics, and patterns of mis/disinformation.

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1.5.4 Enlightened trust in governance (EnTrust)



The EnTrust project is funded by the EU in the context of the Horizon2020 Research and Innovation Programme. The consortium consists of eight partner teams conducting research and dissemination activities in seven countries (the Czech Republic, Denmark, Greece, Germany, Italy, Poland and Serbia) and at the EU-level. Its work-plan consists of seven work-packages devoted to the systematic analysis and reflection of different aspects of 'enlightened trust':

1. The Theoretical and Normative Underpinnings of Trust and Distrust
2. Trust and Distrust at the Street-level of Public Policy
3. The Role of Democratic Social Movements in the Formation of Trust and Distrust
4. The Role of the Media in Trust and Distrust Building: Information or Polarisation?
5. Developmental-psychological Insight into Trust and Distrust



6. Appraising Citizens' Trust and Distrust in Governance: Forms, Determinants, Effects and Remedies
7. Civilising Trust and Distrust: Role Models and Recommendations

Key policy briefs

EnTrust. Integrated Policy Paper

The integrated policy paper summarizes the twelve key-findings of the previous published policy briefs. The EnTrust project recommends a comprehensive strategy to strengthen democratic trust and resilience across Europe. It calls for systematic monitoring of civic space at both national and EU levels within a reinforced Rule of Law framework, paired with greater transparency in EU institutions through a new inter-institutional agreement that could guide Member States. Local democracy should be empowered through targeted support, investment, and policy exchange under a renewed European Democracy Action Plan. EnTrust also urges the establishment of a European dimension of public services to advance the European Pillar of Social Rights. To safeguard the information environment, the project stresses the need to closely monitor the implementation of the Digital Services Act and the EU AI Act, ensuring they effectively counter disinformation and protect fundamental rights. A strong European Media Freedom Act and an anti-SLAPP directive are essential to secure independent, high-quality journalism as a public good. EnTrust also highlights the importance of simplifying EU funding procedures for civil society organisations, enabling them to operate more effectively. Education and participation form another pillar of the recommendations. Media literacy and civic education should be systematically integrated into school curricula, supported by the Audiovisual Media Services Directive and monitored Council recommendations on inclusive education. Youth participation must be enhanced through measures such as lowering the voting age, youth quotas, and youth-impact assessments. More broadly, the project calls for the implementation of Article 11 TEU by creating a legal framework for meaningful civil dialogue, and it urges governments at all levels to promote deliberative democratic mechanisms that involve citizens beyond elections (Lahusen & Besozzi, 2024).

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How this influenced the ActEU policy briefs

Both the EnTrust and ActEU projects highlight the urgent need to rebuild democratic trust in Europe by protecting fundamental rights, strengthening civic space, and expanding meaningful political participation. They converge on the view that safeguarding freedoms of expression, protest, and association is crucial for sustaining citizens' engagement and confidence in democratic institutions, and that civil society must be supported through transparent, depoliticised funding mechanisms. Both emphasise the importance of improving the information environment through media literacy, high-quality journalism, fact-checking, and stronger regulation of digital platforms, while also calling for greater youth involvement and more systematic monitoring of trust and participation trends across Europe. At the same time, EnTrust adopts a broader, institution-focused approach that goes beyond ActEU's emphasis on political trust and non-electoral participation. It proposes structural reforms to the EU's governance framework, including a reinforced Rule of Law cycle, greater transparency in EU institutions, empowered local democracy, and a European dimension of public services. EnTrust also advances a comprehensive regulatory agenda—ranging from the implementation of the Digital Services Act and EU AI Act to the Media Freedom Act and anti-SLAPP protections—and calls for integrating civic and media literacy into school curricula, lowering obstacles to youth participation, and formalising civil dialogue through Article 11 TEU. While ActEU provides insights into how elite-driven narratives and participation dynamics shape political trust, EnTrust offers a wider blueprint for strengthening Europe's democratic infrastructure and resilience.



1.5.5 Inclusive Citizenship in a World in Transformation: Co-Designing for Democracy (INCITE-DEM)



Inclusive Citizenship in a World in Transformation: Co-Designing for Democracy (INCITE-DEM) strengthens inclusive participation across Europe by empowering citizens to drive democratic innovation. Using Democracy Labs, the project conducts large-scale generative and participatory design research that sparks creative thinking and turns citizen ideas into practical democratic solutions. The project deployed Democracy Labs in six countries: Norway, Germany, Slovenia, Italy, Spain, and Portugal, with approximately 180 participants in total (about 30 participants per country).

Key policy briefs

Policy synthesis #1: Democratic innovations for sustainability

The policy brief highlights the framework conditions needed to foster meaningful democratic participation. It stresses the importance of inclusiveness, calling for democratic innovations (DIs) that remove socioeconomic barriers, ensure diverse representation, and provide support such as compensation, equipment, accessibility measures, and facilitation that reduces power imbalances. It also emphasises the value of targeted approaches for vulnerable or marginalised groups, including dedicated citizen panels and a stronger focus on youth and future generations. To keep citizens engaged, the brief recommends strengthening interaction with decision-makers, clearly communicating how citizen input can shape outcomes, and using innovative tools—such as social simulations and the INCITE-DEM Dialogue Tool—to help participants reflect on social dynamics. Effective communication strategies across traditional and digital media are needed to increase visibility, participation, and public trust. The brief also calls for better integration of citizen input into policy processes, embedding DIs into governance structures and ensuring coordination among existing EU participatory tools to reinforce legitimacy. Finally, it underscores the need for a culture of learning and adaptation, using continuous evaluation, participant feedback, and regular updates to citizens to ensure that DIs remain effective and responsive to evolving societal needs (Cots et al., 2024).

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How this influenced the ActEU policy briefs

Both initiatives emphasise inclusive participation as a foundation for democratic legitimacy and trust. INCITE-DEM concentrates on designing participatory processes and practical engagement methods, including dedicated approaches for vulnerable groups, while ActEU focuses on the institutional conditions that enable participation, such as democratic safeguards, fair governance, and protection of rights. Both agree that trust grows when participation is meaningful and institutions are responsive, yet they differ in emphasis: INCITE-DEM highlights engagement practices, visibility, and clarity, whereas ActEU addresses countering misinformation, political framing, and system-level alignment. They also share a commitment to embedding citizen input into governance structures and promoting continuous learning. However, INCITE-DEM prioritises evaluating participatory formats, while ActEU stresses monitoring institutions, political actors, and



public behaviour to strengthen democratic practice. Overall INCITE-DEM's policy recommendations and democracy labs complement our policy briefs by laying the cornerstone towards a political educated and active civic society in Europe.

2 Creation Process

2.1 Process Overview

The work began with an extensive review of project deliverables. Initially, attention was given to those deliverables explicitly expected to contain recommendations, as listed by the Grand Agreement.

Table 4: List of all Deliverables with Policy recommendations

Deliverable	Title
2.4	Report on variation across policy areas of climate change, migration and gender
2.5	Report on the consequences of deceitful behavior for political trust
3.2	Report on changing patterns of citizens' political participation
3.3	Report describing the relationships between trust and participation within the fields of immigration and climate change on the basis of web-scraped data and survey experiments
3.4	Report explaining for which groups in society, decreasing trust acts as a critical mediator for the changing pattern of citizens' political participation in Europe
4.2	Report on the patterns of objective representation across countries and across parties within countries
4.3	Report on the populist far right, representation and their role in view of the new transnational cleavage (migration, climate change, and gender equality)
4.4	Report on the pirate innovations and the link between responsiveness and political trust and legitimacy of these party movements
5.2	Collection of a joint series of policy briefs

Subsequently, all other available deliverables were examined. To ensure timely access to relevant material, requests were made to consortium members for early drafts of upcoming deliverables and for copies of deliverables that had recently reached their publication deadline. Early versions of deliverables scheduled for publication during the writing period were also requested to assess their potential relevance to the policy briefs. After compiling all available recommendations and identifying key points that could be reframed as such, three findings were selected in consultation with TEPSA.

The topics chosen addressed: (1) top-down issue framing by populist parties, (2) participation and protection of fundamental rights, and (3) subnational levels.

Initial summaries were drafted for each topic area, with subsequent coordination among the contributors (Henrich, Grobe & Vignjevic) to ensure conceptual consistency. Throughout the process, close collaboration was maintained with TEPSA to determine the most effective workflow. A comprehensive timeline for drafting and revising the deliverables was established at an early stage. The initial summaries were expanded to incorporate relevant data drawn directly from the



analyzed deliverables. Following feedback from Eva Ribera and Barbara Vanotti, the first full drafts of the three policy briefs were prepared: covering fundamental rights (Jonathan Grobe), subnational levels (Jonathan Grobe/ Arnika Henrich), and top-down (Arnika Henrich).

After several rounds of feedback, primarily from TEPSA, second drafts were developed. Additional feedback was obtained from members of the civil society network, facilitated through TEPSA's contacts. As part of the CSN, Manuel Müller (Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Helsinki) provided further comments, which formed later revisions of the briefs.

During the summer, the consortium as a whole was invited to provide feedback on the draft briefs. Most responses concerned missing data and the need to improve clarity. We would like to acknowledge valuable feedback in particular from Felix-Christopher von Nostitz (ICL), Wit Hubert (SWPS), Liesa Döpcke (UDE), Philipp König (USAAR), Henrik Serup Christensen (ÅAU), and Louisa Parks (UNITN), among others. After all feedback was incorporated, final drafts of the three policy briefs were completed and prepared for publication by TEPSA. After meeting the deliverable deadline of 30th November 2025, the publication of the briefs was scheduled for January 2026 to maximise their visibility and impact.

3 Overview of the Policy Briefs

This section demonstrates how ActEU's key insights were systematically translated into the specific policy briefs, in accordance with the logic outlined above. Additionally, the core insights of the specific policy briefs are highlighted and more details about the utilized data, methods and results are given.

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3.1 Deliverable Brief 1

The first policy brief, *Rebuilding Trust from the Ground Up: Strengthening Subnational Governance to Reinforce Democratic Legitimacy*, highlights the crucial role of subnational governance in shaping overall political trust. Drawing on ActEU evidence, it shows that citizens evaluate local, national, and European institutions through different lenses, but that experiences at the local level strongly influence trust in higher levels of governance.

The analysis was based on merged datasets that combined V-Dem and Standard Eurobarometer data spanning the years 2019 to 2023. To show the relation between institutional political and subnational trust, all variables of the Eurobarometer as well as V-Dem variables on local and regional governance were used. The researchers discovered that subnational autonomy increases trust in subnational authorities but may reduce trust in national governments (the so-called zero-sum legitimacy). Contrasting subnational democratic quality strengthens trust at all levels (Christensen et al., 2025, p.102-119).

Where local elections are not fully democratic, where participation is limited, or where political parties lack local presence, distrust grows and spreads upward. Conversely, transparent electoral practices, inclusive decision-making, and active local party structures reinforce legitimacy across the system. The brief argues that trust-building must be treated as an explicit governance goal rather than a secondary effect. Key recommendations include institutionalizing electoral fairness at the subnational level, strengthening participatory practices, aligning autonomy with integration into national and EU frameworks, and incorporating trust as a measurable outcome of reforms.

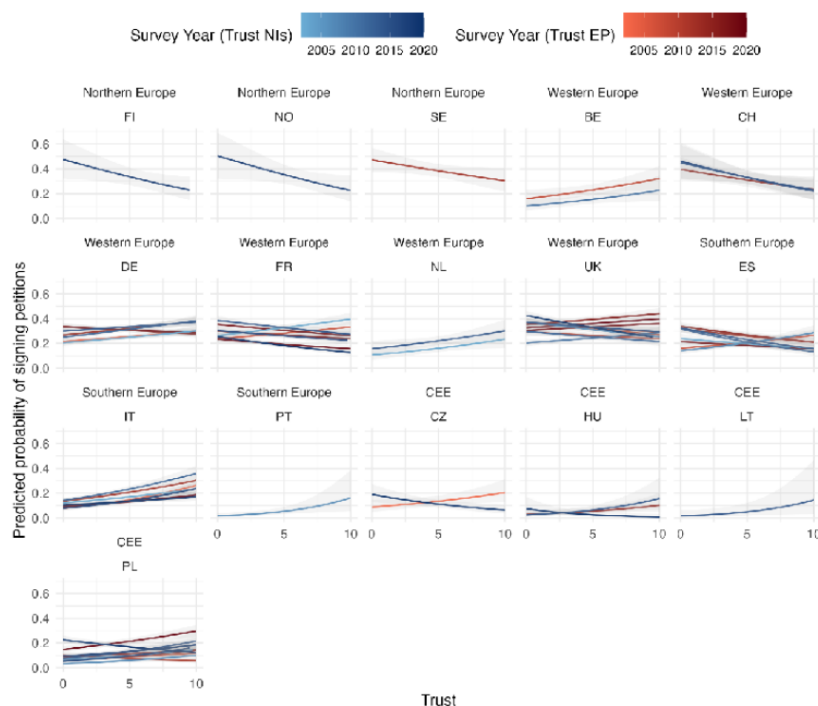


3.2 Deliverable Brief 2

The second policy brief, *How to rebuild public trust: The influence of non-electoral participation in Europe*, examines how restrictions on democratic freedoms (especially peaceful protest) undermine political trust. While non-electoral participation across Europe has remained relatively stable, its forms vary substantially across countries, reflecting distinct political cultures. ActEU findings indicate that although political trust does not consistently predict non-electoral participation, certain types of engagement, particularly boycotting, are associated with lower trust.

The findings are based on the European Social Survey rounds 1-10 (Pamies et al., 2024, p.37-39). Political trust was measured by an index including trust in national institutions and actors such as parliament, parties, politicians, and the legal system, complemented by trust in the European Parliament to capture the different levels of trust (see 3.1). Non-electoral participation forms are: worn or displayed campaign badges or stickers, boycotted products, contacted politicians or government officials, participated in demonstrations, and signed petitions in the last 12 months. Across Europe, the significant links between political trust and non-electoral participation appear mostly in Western and Southern countries. They discovered that higher trust usually increases the likelihood of wearing badges, boycotting decreases as trust increases, contacting officials is mostly positively related to trust, participation varies widely by country and year, and signing petitions can show either a positive or negative association depending on the country (Figure 5) (Pamies et al., 2024, p.50-54).

Figure 5 Relationship of Trust and Non-electoral Political Participation per Country from 2005 to 2020 (ESS data)



The erosion of fundamental rights such as protest, expression, and association threatens democratic legitimacy and fuels disengagement. To counter this, the brief calls for stronger EU-member state collaboration to guarantee core freedoms, impartial public funding for civil society organizations,



and improved data collection on non-electoral participation to better understand its relationship with trust.

3.3 Deliverable Brief 3

The third policy brief, *Who speaks loudest? The real drivers behind political polarization*, explores how populist parties in Central Europe shape political agendas by elevating topics such as immigration, climate change, and gender, often framing them as urgent or threatening regardless of actual public demand. Table 3 provides an overview of the considered parties by their respective countries (Tab. 3).

Table 5 The list of the selected Central European populist parties

Country	Party name
Hungary	Fidesz
	Jobbik
Poland	Law and Justice (PiS)
	Sovereign Poland (SP)
Czechia	Freedom and Democracy (SPD)
	ANO
Slovakia	Slovak National Party (SNS)
	SMER-SSD
	Slovakia (previously OL'aNO)
	Sme Rodina

ActEU evidence shows that these issues do not strongly determine voting intentions; instead, anti-establishment sentiment and low trust in local government drive support for populist actors. The evidence was gathered by recent manifestos mostly spanning the time between 2020 and 2023 (Kochlöffel et al., 2025, p.14).

Nevertheless, the persistent top-down framing of immigration, amplified by traditional and social media, significantly influences public perceptions, which were analysed in four steps. First, they read all documents and identified relevant text parts (called quasi-sentences) about the three topics (gender, immigration, and climate), which resulted in 83 quasi-sentences. After that, coder 1 and coder 2 independently used an open coding procedure to classify the quasi-sentences, their inter-coder reliability after Cohen's kappa was of excellent agreement (Kochlöffel et al., 2025, p.15). The framing analysis showed that all parties unanimously addressed immigration negatively, stressing threats about security, identity and economic well-being (Kochlöffel et al., 2025, p.17-19). Climate, in contrast, is portrayed in a dual and localized way, highlighting its potential benefits while simultaneously depicting international climate regulations as external threats to citizens' everyday lives (Kochlöffel et al., 2025, p.19-22). The least mentioned topic (gender) was framed as a threat to traditional family structures while also trying to appeal to women by using a modern narrative and promising equal opportunities. It was also stressed that national sovereignty gets undermined by external gender-equality policies (Kochlöffel et al., 2025, p.23-24).



The brief stresses the need for mainstream parties to offer clear, substantive alternatives and for voters to be equipped with tools to recognize strategic framing. Recommendations include developing coherent non-populist narratives, investing in civic and media literacy, fostering inclusive public debate through participatory platforms, and supporting independent monitoring of party discourse and media framing to counter misinformation and strengthen democratic trust.

In the following part the complete policy briefs are included.

4 Policy Briefs

4.1 Brief 1: Rebuilding Trust from the Ground Up: Strengthening Subnational Governance to Reinforce Democratic Legitimacy

4.1.1 Summary

- When subnational elections are undemocratic and lack transparency, and when political parties have low local presence and candidate selection, trust decreases, not just locally, but at all levels of governance. Lack of democratic standards, transparency, and citizen participation at the subnational level weakens trust at all levels. Without fair elections, inclusive decision-making, and proper integration between national and EU frameworks, subnational governance risks becoming a source of disconnection and discontent, especially since local policies directly shape citizens' daily lives
- Trust in governments is highly conditional on perceived legitimacy, performance, and participatory quality. Trust evaluations are informed by competence, inclusiveness, and responsiveness. Citizens tend to trust governments more when they perceive high legitimacy, good performance and have the feeling that political participation is possible.
- Citizens evaluate political actors by their perceived competence, inclusiveness and responsiveness.
- Reforms should be guided by treating trust-building as a core goal of governance, and not as a byproduct

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4.1.2 What's the problem?

Political trust is foundational to legitimacy, and legitimacy is what enables governments to govern effectively. Without it, even a well-crafted policy loses traction. This erosion of trust doesn't stay contained, it spreads upward, weakening confidence in the broader political system. When subnational governance lacks strong democratic standards, it poses a serious risk to trust in national and EU-level institutions.

Across Europe, trust in political institutions is uneven, shaped by how citizens perceive and experience governance at more local levels. However, even though people can distinguish between EU, national, and subnational governance, the perceptions at one level influence the others. The ActEU data show that this influence is neither uniform nor unidirectional, meaning there is no clear pattern about the direction of this influence between countries.



The problem is that the architecture of democratic governance often fails to reinforce trust. The quality of democracy at the subnational level, especially in how it ensures fair elections and enables meaningful participation, has significant consequences for broader democratic stability.

4.1.3 What does the evidence show?

The evidence presented by the ActEU research project (based on Deliverable D 2.3 Christensen et al., 2025 and Deliverable D 2.1 Christensen et al., 2024) and recent Eurobarometer data points to a crucial insight: political trust in Europe is not uniform but differentiated across levels of governance. Citizens evaluate subnational, national, and European institutions separately, using distinct criteria shaped by the perceived performance, responsiveness, and legitimacy of each level. This multi-level understanding of trust has important implications. While trust in one level of government can influence attitudes toward others, it does not automatically transfer. Instead, it depends on the quality of governance experienced at each level.

The findings also highlight that political trust is shaped by subjective evaluations of institutional competence, inclusiveness and responsiveness. Citizens are more likely to trust institutions they perceive as capable of delivering results, acting fairly, and respecting the public's input. These dimensions are most visible and immediate at the local level, where everyday governance is felt most directly. When people see that their local government functions well and listens to them, they are more likely to believe that the political system as a whole is legitimate.

One of the strongest findings is the pivotal role subnational governance plays in shaping overall democratic trust. Where subnational institutions uphold transparent and inclusive practices (especially in electoral processes and participatory mechanisms) citizens are more likely to express confidence in national and EU authorities. Open, accountable, and accessible local level governance becomes a key site for building legitimacy and enhancing the public's sense of political efficacy. Where these standards are lacking, subnational autonomy can undermine trust in national and supranational institutions.

On the other hand, subnational autonomy without strong democratic performance can undermine trust. The evidence shows that regions with more autonomous powers but weak participatory structures or inconsistent governance standards risk weakening public confidence in national and supranational institutions. This finding makes clear that autonomy alone is not enough. What matters is the democratic quality of subnational governance: how decisions are made, how elections are run, and how responsive institutions are to citizens' needs.

Political parties also play a crucial role in this dynamic. Parties that are present and active at the local level and involve citizens in candidate selection and internal decision-making, help cultivate a more participatory democratic culture. Their presence builds familiarity and trust, making politics feel more tangible and accessible. This bottom-up engagement supports the development of trust in institutions at all levels.

Ultimately, the evidence makes clear that subnational governance is not a secondary concern in the architecture of political trust, it is a cornerstone. To rebuild and sustain trust in democratic institutions, policymakers must invest in the democratic quality of local governance, ensuring it is participatory, transparent, and integrated with national and EU-level frameworks. Without this foundation, efforts to strengthen trust at higher levels will remain fragile and incomplete.



4.1.4 What should be done and key recommendations

- **Institutionalizing electoral fairness at the subnational Level:** Local and regional elections must be systematically monitored for freedom and fairness. Countries should adopt national standards (backed by independent oversight) to guarantee consistent democratic integrity across all regions. EU institutions can provide benchmarks and support mechanisms, especially in states with weaker local safeguards.
- **Promote participatory governance locally:** Empower subnational bodies to engage citizens through town halls, participatory and local referenda. Investments in civic infrastructure, such as digital platforms for consultation or community assemblies, should be increased. Political parties must be encouraged to maintain permanent local branches and decentralize candidate selection at lower levels, fostering deeper community ties with local communities.
- **Balance autonomy with integration:** National sovereignty must be aligned with EU-wide democratic goals. These mechanisms are essential for creating a common framework of values and expectations across different levels, helping to avoid fragmentation and ensure coherent policymaking. This includes cooperative legislative forums between national and subnational governments, and structured intergovernmental dialogue supported by EU funding.
- **Treat trust as a governance outcome:** Trust isn't just a feeling, it's a measurable outcome of transparent, responsive, and inclusive governance. Subnational reforms should be designed and evaluated with trust-building as an explicit goal, much like efficiency or policy compliance.

Trust doesn't trickle down; it builds from the bottom up. A democratic system is only as strong as its foundations. By ensuring transparent elections and enabling participatory mechanisms at the subnational level, EU and national leaders can anchor legitimacy where it matters most: in the lived experience of everyday governance.

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4.2 Brief 2: How to rebuild public trust: The influence of non-electoral participation in Europe

4.2.1 Summary

- Trust in politicians and political institutions is important for ensuring the efficient functioning of our political system, since restrictions on democratic freedoms, like peaceful protest and free expression, reduce citizens' political participation and fuel public distrust, weakening the legitimacy of political institutions and leaders
- EU Institutions should work more closely with member states to ensure the protection of fundamental rights and act more swiftly using legal instruments when violations occur, to help safeguard citizens' rights and trust in politics

4.2.2 What's the problem?

In the last years, a growing number of governments across Europe have tightened restrictions on core democratic freedoms - such as the right to peaceful protest, free expression, and association. These constraints are making it increasingly difficult for citizens to participate in politics beyond the ballot box, silencing voices that seek to be heard through demonstrations and civic action. As a result, many people feel ignored and repressed by political leaders and institutions, fuelling a dangerous rise in public distrust.



Trust in political institutions is not just a nice-to-have - it's essential. When trust erodes, legitimacy becomes fragile, hindering the exercise of governing and legislating on pressing issues. In an era marked by overlapping crises, from climate change to economic instability, political trust is one of the EU's most valuable assets. Without it, even the most well-intentioned policies risk falling flat due to a lack of legitimacy.

4.2.3 What does the evidence show?

A recent study by the ActEU project (based on Deliverable D 3.2 Pamies et al., 2024) paints a diverse picture of political engagement across Europe over the past two decades. While the overall level of non-electoral political action - such as wearing campaign badges, boycotting products, contacting officials, demonstrating, and signing petitions - has remained relatively steady, the ways in which people choose to participate vary widely from country to country. Petition signing emerges as the most popular form of action in many nations, but not everywhere: in Greece and Finland, for instance, citizens are more inclined to express their political views by boycotting products.

The study also explored the relationship between political trust and non-electoral participation. Even though, it found that in most cases, there's little to no direct connection between the two, the exceptions are even more concerning: Instances where higher levels of political trust go hand-in-hand with more active civic engagement. This is the case for every form of non-electoral participation, with the exception of boycotting, which is consistently a sign for lower political trust. These findings suggest that providing meaningful avenues for non-electoral participation could play a key role in building and reinforcing public trust in political institutions and leaders.

What should be done?

To strengthen public trust in political institutions and support meaningful civic engagement, the EU and its member states need to move beyond reactive approaches and take a more deliberate role in fostering democratic participation. A coordinated strategy should protect fundamental rights, ensure impartial support for civil society, and improve understanding of non-electoral political engagement through better data collection.

4.2.4 Key Recommendations

To strengthen public trust in political institutions and support meaningful civic engagement, the EU and its member states need to move beyond reactive approaches and take a more deliberate role in fostering democratic participation. A coordinated strategy should protect fundamental rights, ensure impartial support for civil society, and improve understanding of non-electoral political engagement through better data collection.

- **Better protection of protest rights:** The European Commission, the Council and European Parliament as well as all other relevant EU institutions should **more actively engage with member states** in ensuring the protection of fundamental rights, like the right to peaceful protest.
- If member states do not fundamentally comply, the European Commission should **make use of all of the legal instruments available to ensure compliance**.
- **Neutral and transparent funding of civil society organizations:** Public funding of civil society organizations should be based on **neutral and transparent allocation mechanisms**. Biased funding distribution can undermine trust in institutions and discourage active civic participation.



- **More fine-grained survey-data:** Cross-national surveys only feature specific questions about a limited number of forms of non-electoral participation. For a better understanding of non-electoral participation and its effect on political trust, Surveys like the **Eurobarometer or the European Social Survey should include every 4-5 years special modules** in which they ask participants about the non-electoral political action and the motivations behind them in more general terms.

4.3 Brief 3: Who speaks loudest? The real drivers behind political polarization

4.3.1 Summary

- Populist parties in Central Europe care more about immigration, climate change, and gender issues than voters do. They therefore shape these debates from the top-down, controlling the narrative, often disregarding public demand and following their own agenda by simplifying complex issues into clear, emotionally charged messages.
- Immigration remains the most mentioned issue for populist success in Central Europe. However, the way in which this issue is framed might influence public attitudes. It is also important to note that traditional media and social media can create echo chambers around the topic, amplifying populist narratives.
- The populist ownership of the immigration issue cannot be challenged without clear alternatives. Mainstream parties must develop programmatic responses and stimulate broader public debate to offer voters real choices
- Educating voters on how political narratives are constructed and spread as well as encouraging open, inclusive public debate on contested topics, could help reshape the agenda setting from the bottom-up

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4.3.2 What's the problem?

Across Central Europe, political debates around immigration, gender, and climate are heating up, but these aren't necessarily voter-driven concerns. Instead, populist parties are pushing these topics to the top of the agenda – an effort reinforced through selective media coverage and social media activity by political elites. Populist parties continue to dominate debates (especially around immigration), because they are often the only actors offering consistent, emotionally charged narratives, regardless of how closely these align with public opinion. In many cases, mainstream parties lack clear alternative messages, while voters remain under-informed about how political framing works. At the same time, media and social platforms often amplify populist messages and false claims (frequently without adequate fact-checking) thereby reinforcing their importance and shaping public perception. These topics are often presented in simplified, emotional, or confrontational terms, designed to provoke strong reactions and divide public opinion. While such framing strategies may help populist parties gain support, they can have damaging long-term effects: they distort democratic debate, reduce space for compromise, and weaken trust in institutions.

This creates a growing disconnect between the issues which voters are concerned with and those that dominate the political agenda. It is therefore important to understand and be aware of the politicization of issues by parties. This refers to the use of selective framing to mark an issue as widespread, even though it has not been perceived as such. In a time of rising disinformation, geopolitical instability, and democratic retrogression in some EU member states, it is urgent for policymakers to understand how these narratives take hold and what can be done to promote a



more balanced, inclusive political discourse. The extent to which citizens perceive immigration as a major “problem” is often exaggerated, as many non-populist parties increasingly align with anti-migrant narratives in pursuit of electoral gains.

4.3.3 What does the evidence show?

Despite the strong focus of populist parties on issues like immigration, climate change, and gender, ActEU results (based on Deliverable D 4.5 Kochlöffel et al. 2025) show that these topics do not significantly shape people’s voting intentions. In other words, voters do not choose populist parties based on their views on these issues, rather their anti-establishment sentiment combined with lower trust in the local government drive their voting decision.

Therefore, leadership style and trust in institutions play a major role in shaping voters’ choices, challenging common assumptions about the drivers of populist support.

A recent study conducted in the ActEU research project shows that immigration remains the most powerful issue for populist parties in Central Europe. These parties rely heavily on selective framing to shape the public discourse, which has a clear impact on public attitudes and helps populist parties maintain control over how immigration is perceived and discussed.

Overall, the findings suggest that these polarizing topics are shaped more by political leaders than by public opinion. Even on issues like immigration, it is often the way that parties communicate their ideas (not strong voter beliefs) that drives the debate.

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4.3.4 What should be done?

To counter elite-driven populist discourse and its disproportionate influence on the political agenda, the EU and its member states need to move beyond reactive strategies. A coordinated policy response should aim to rebalance political discourse, equip voters with critical tools, and support evidence-based monitoring of how narratives are created and spread. This could include systematic misinformation training, more consistent fact-checking practices, and the use of new technologies to detect and counter false or manipulative content.

4.3.5 Key recommendations

- **Break the monopoly on immigration narratives:** Non-populist parties should **develop clear, coherent alternatives** to populist messaging on immigration. This means moving beyond vague statements to **offer concrete policy proposals**, engaging with voters through transparent communication, and creating space for **more constructive and fact-based discussions**.
- **Strengthen voter education on political framing:** Public awareness campaigns, civic education programs, and partnerships with civil society organizations should help citizens **recognize how narratives are constructed and understand the difference between opinion, emotion, and fact**. The goal is not to tell voters what to think, but to empower them to think critically.
- **Stimulate broader public debate:** EU institutions and national governments should **invest in platforms that foster inclusive public dialogue** (e.g., citizen assemblies and structured consultations), especially on divisive topics like immigration, climate, and gender. When more voices are heard, populist narratives lose their dominance.



- **Fund independent monitoring of party discourse and media framing:** To understand and respond to the influence of elite-driven narratives, the EU should **support long-term, cross-national research initiatives** that track how political parties frame key issues and how these frames evolve over time, especially during election periods. This monitoring should cover both online and offline media, including the amplification of populist language on social media and the ways mainstream media adopt or echo these frames. Integrating more consistent and timely fact-checking into this process can help combat disinformation and lead to more trust in the democratic discourse.

5 Conclusion

This deliverable set out to translate key findings from the ActEU project into a joint series of policy briefs that support policymakers in addressing the complex dynamics of political trust in Europe. The three briefs produced focus on distinct but interconnected dimensions of this challenge: the top-down influence of political elites and populist agenda-setting, the role of participation and the protection of fundamental rights in shaping citizens' engagement, and the foundational importance of subnational governance for building trust from the ground up. Together, they offer a coherent set of insights that make ActEU's research accessible and actionable for decision-makers. The policy briefs will be published on TEPSA's homepage and the blogposts on "Der Europäische Föderalist", where impact could be measured in terms of page views and interactions (e.g., sharing online, comments, likes).

By condensing complex evidence into clear messages and targeted recommendations, the briefs aim to inform policy debates across governance levels, with a particular focus on national and European institutions, while remaining relevant for local and regional actors. To maximize their reach, the briefs will be publicly released early next year, after the holiday period, ensuring greater visibility and impact. In the meantime, a soft launch within the USAAR setting will allow for testing their clarity and usefulness among students, providing valuable feedback on how a younger audience engages with the material.

The themes addressed -elite-driven framing, civic freedoms, and local democratic quality-underscore the need for continued attention to the factors that shape political trust. Sustaining this focus, and ensuring that research continues to feed into public debate and policymaking, will be essential for strengthening democratic resilience across Europe.

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Supplementary Material: Blog Post Articles¹

Economic deprivation reduces political trust

By Henrik Serup Christensen and Janette Huttunen

Political trust is a fundamental precondition for the stability and legitimacy of the political system. For our societies to function smoothly, we need to hold at least some level of trust in the actors and institutions that make authoritative decisions on our behalf. We do not have to agree with everything

¹ Final published versions may include minor differences from the versions included here.



they do, but a general belief that the system works for the common good is nonetheless favourable. For this reason, the study of political trust has been a central theme within political science.

Levels of trust differ between social groups

Studies show that levels of political trust change across time and place, but it can be difficult to find a common pattern in these developments. All countries experience ups and downs in their levels of trust that are shaped by historical legacies, international crises, and domestic political events. It may therefore be difficult to identify a common trend in these developments.

A more enduring finding is that there seem to be persistent differences in levels of political trust across groups in society. Several studies show that levels of trust differ across factors such as age, gender, and ethnicity. Especially in our times of crises – from the climate crisis to increasing security threats in Europe, rising anti-democratic sentiments, and the competitiveness and innovation gap in EU – the question of how we can sustain different societal groups' trust in our political system becomes ever more imperative. Without high levels of political trust, democratic states may be incapable of navigating through this turmoil.

Disadvantaged groups are expected to have less trust

Disadvantaged groups are often expected to hold lower levels of political trust. For example, women, young people, and people with lower educational attainment tend to hold lower levels of trust compared to their male, older, and well-educated counterparts. This finding is explained by political economy theories and the “winner hypothesis”, which hold that groups with greater resources in the form of either human (e.g., education, skills, and health) or economic capital (such as income) are most likely to trust political institutions since they benefit most from the status quo of the social and political system.

People in higher social strata have more political influence, which allows them to defend their interests and therefore have more trust in political institutions. Since disadvantaged groups do not benefit as much from the political system they place less trust in these institutions.

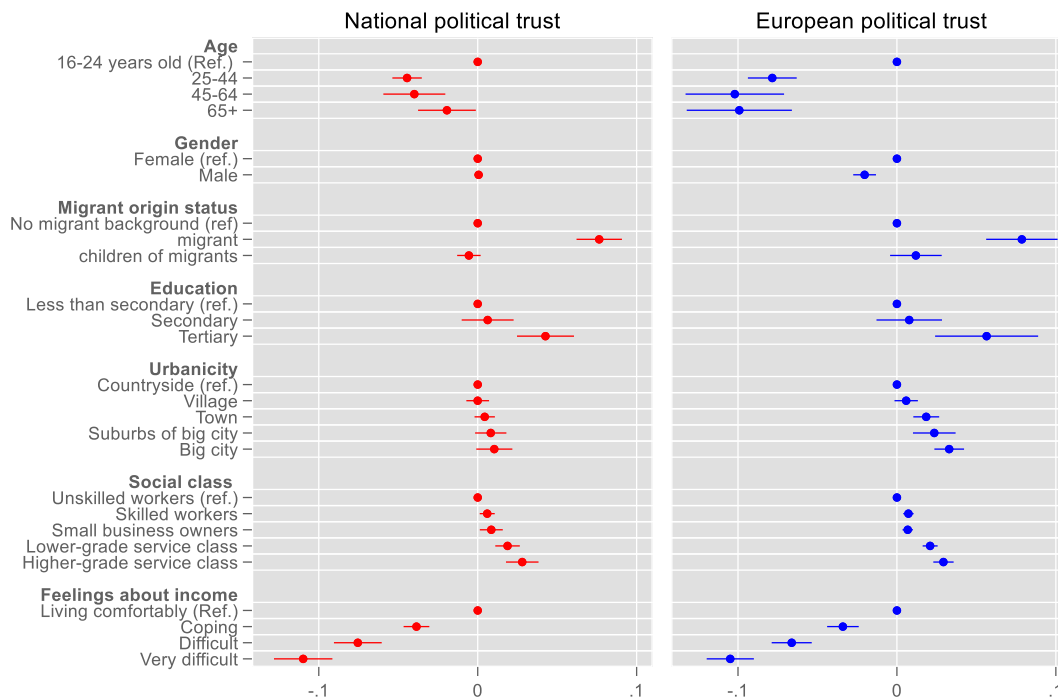
This theoretical proposition has been examined in several studies. The findings are generally supportive. For example, higher income is associated with higher levels of political trust, and belonging to the middle or upper class is associated with higher trust in national political institutions, compared to other social classes.

Which factors can really explain differences in trust?

But the extent to which sociodemographic inequalities can account for differences in levels of political trust is still unclear. Furthermore, we still don't know which of these inequalities are more important in shaping differences in political trust. Within the framework of the Horizon Europe funded project ActEU, we delved into the question of how socio-demographic characters and status affect citizens' political trust across Europe. With the help of time series data from the European Social Survey (ESS) covering 2002-2023, we mapped the extent to which seven socioeconomic factors can help explain differences in political trust: age, gender, migrant origin, urbanicity, educational attainment, social class, and subjective feelings about household income.

We examined the relationship between these factors and political trust at both the national and European levels of government. Figure 1 shows results of regression analyses where we compare the association of each of these with political trust at the European and national level.

Figure 1 Multilevel regression coefficients, ESS2002-2023



Our analysis shows, first of all, that many of the suggested differences are not that large when taking into account other factors. However, it would be a mistake to interpret this as evidence that socio-demographic factors are largely irrelevant. Instead, it shows that they are closely connected and that certain groups may combine several traits that depress the level of trust.

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Subjective income strongly impacts the level of trust

For one factor, however, there are clear differences in levels of trust at both the national and EU institutions: subjective income. This variable concerns the extent to which *respondents feel that they can get by on their current household income*. Europe has in recent years undergone a string of turmoil that has had a negative effect on average citizens' spending capacity and depressed their sense of security. Inflation, the Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the energy crisis, among others, have tested citizens' confidence in their personal economy, making the measure especially relevant currently.

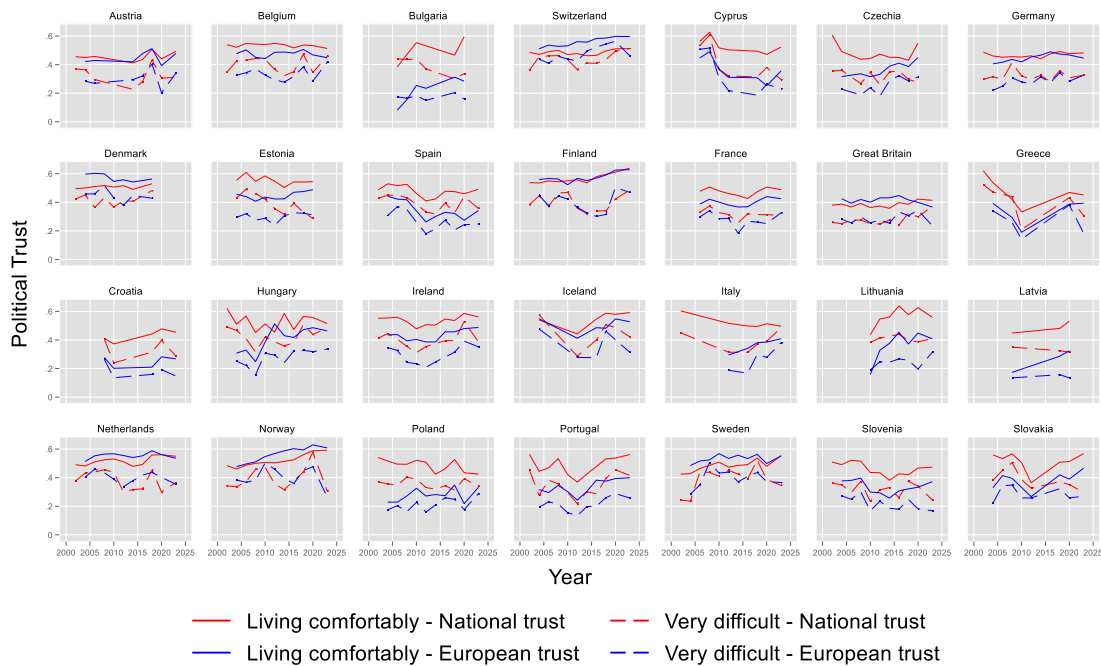
The result shows that people who experience difficulties getting by on their current household income on average hold lower levels of trust in the political system at both the national and European government levels. The differences are quite pronounced, and they are all the more remarkable considering that the results adjust for differences in factors such as education and social class. Across all other factors, people who feel that they have difficulties getting by economically express lower levels of political trust. While we are unable to establish causality with our data, this finding suggests that material insecurity is a key driving force explaining differences in political trust.

Since, as for example Thomas Piketty noted in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, economic inequality is at least partially a result of political decisions, its effect on trust in the very institutions responsible for the policymaking is logical. It is nevertheless remarkable that economic hardship manifests itself so clearly in feelings of animosity toward the political system.

The effect is visible across countries ...

The pervasive effect of economic hardship is also evident when we examine country-level differences in how economic hardship shape political trust over time. In Figure 2, we show country-by-country bivariate relationships between subjective income feeling and political trust over the time period 2002-2023. To make the comparison easier to follow, we only display differences between the two extreme categories here (Living comfortably vs. Very difficult to get by).

Figure 2 Country level differences in political trust depending on feelings about income, ESS2002-2023I



Note: weighted data

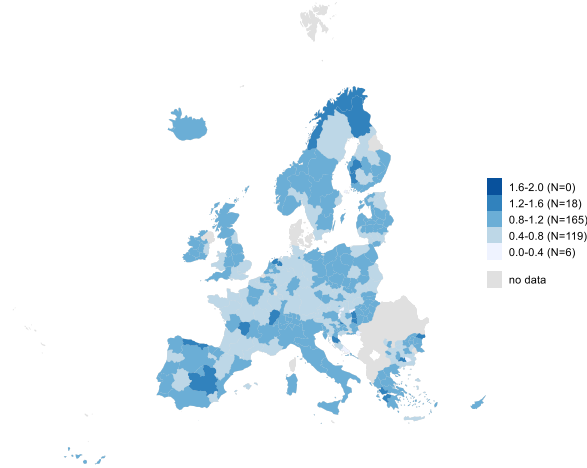
These results show that those who are living comfortably generally have higher trust at both the European and national level, whereas those who are struggling tend to have lower trust. This pattern is found in all countries, although the magnitude of the differences differs. While some fluctuations occur, the pattern is remarkably consistent across countries. Furthermore, it seems like the gap has been widening in most countries over time. This suggests that the differences are growing even more pronounced over time.

... and holds for trust in the European, national, and regional level

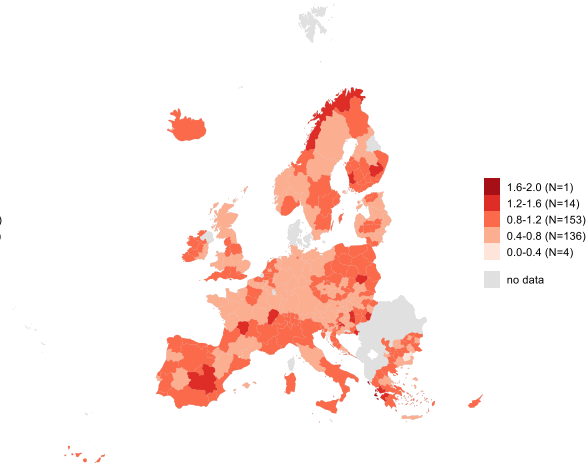
Economic hardship is thus a strong and consistent predictor of lower levels of political trust in both European and national levels across Europe. But what do we find at the regional level? In Figure 3, we visualize the differences in trust between those who are well off and those who are struggling at the regional level. This only shows the situation for the year 2020.

Figure 3 Subjective income ratios of trust at the regional level (NUTS 2 + 3), ESS2020

European Political Trust income ratio 2020



National Political Trust income ratio 2020



Ratios around 1 indicate that economic hardship plays less of a role in shaping levels of trust. Ratios above 1 (darker colours) mean that those who experience economic hardship have higher trust than those without problems getting by, while ratios below 1 (lighter colours) indicate that those who experience economic hardship have lower trust. These results clearly demonstrate that both European and national level trust tend to be lower among groups who experience economic hardship in most regions across Europe. Hence economic hardship is a strong predictor for political trust even at the regional level.

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Feelings matter

The extent to which people feel that they are able to cope on their household income is therefore of key importance for understanding differences in political trust in society. Economic hardship is a pivotal factor that can undermine levels of trust.

The implications of this finding are manyfold. Perhaps most importantly, it points to concrete solutions for increasing levels of political trust. First of all, it is worth noting that what matters is not only the economic reality of citizens, calculable by euros, i.e., the money they have in their household to spend, but also people's subjective *feelings* about their household's economic state. Improving citizens' trust in their economic situation is important for increasing political trust. To boost political trust, it is imperative to increase the economic security of the European populations.

Equitable growth, affordable basic commodities, welfare policies are key

One way to achieve this is increasing the amount of money that households have for their basic needs. Policies that aim to ensure economic growth may be part of the solution since sustained economic growth can make the pie bigger for everyone. But it is essential that this growth benefits those who have a hard time getting by. Economic growth that only benefits those at the top of society may inadvertently damage political trust, since those who do not benefit will feel even



worse about their economic situation when others are thriving. A functioning labour market that provides opportunities for all is therefore also part of the solution.

Furthermore, economic fortune is not only about the amount of money in your pocket. It is also about how far that money goes – how well basic human needs can be met. This entails that the prices of basic essentials such as groceries, housing, heating, and healthcare are of primary importance. To increase levels of trust, individuals need to be sure that they will be able to buy these basic commodities. To boost political trust, helpful economic policies may include measures that aim to ensure low and stable inflation, especially on food and basic commodities. Establishing a sense of economic security will also be beneficial. Hence, welfare policies that ensure the basic needs of all can help boost political trust.

These solutions may be costly, but they seem to be decisive if we want to ensure the legitimacy of our political system in the future.

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This article is based on the authors' contributions to the ActEU project's "[Report on how trends in trust among specific social and political groups, including ethnic and territorial identities, territorial attachment and regime types at subnational level impact on varying levels of trust across European subnational units](#)", published in March 2025.



ActEU Democracy Labs: A young perspective on politics and political education in the EU

By Alexander Hoppe

In the last years, political participation, representation, polarization, and, not least, political trust have been recurring topics of debate in the European Union. The ActEU research project has focused on these issues, as well. One societal group which is often in the centre of debates on these issues is the European Youth. Taking the young perspectives on the EU multi-level political system and the problems we have in political education on the EU serious is immensely important.

Studies on the political attitudes, trust, and voting behaviour of young people have repeatedly caused concern in politics and the media recently. It is a widely recognized problem that politicians and academics like to talk about young people rather than with them, and young perspectives are rarely effectively incorporated in political debates and decisions. The ActEU project has set as one of its goals to address this problem and involve young Europeans in the research process, in order to take the perspectives and experiences of young Europeans serious.

To this end, we designed the 'ActEU Youth Democracy Labs', which were implemented by all project partners. The aim of the labs was to have young Europeans develop concrete policy recommendations – both concerning the EU political system as well as political education. Based on a common conceptualization, it was possible to gather young perspectives from different European countries. In total, more than 300 participants developed over 400 recommendations. While participants in different countries partly had diverged in their policy focus, we also saw agreement on a lot of key demands.

First, the good news: According to our not necessarily representative labs, young European show high interest in politics. Our participants showed a clear willingness to engage with the complex reality of the EU multi-level system and to get involved through participatory processes. The labs themselves can be considered a success: this form of interactive engagement with political issues, focusing on an active role for participants, works.

Yet the labs also show an urgent need for action. This comprehensive report details the results of the labs. Here, we will solely focus on the most central recommendations most frequently mentioned by the participants.

A key concern for young Europeans is to offer citizens more influence and opportunities for participation. Citizens' forums and other consultative forms of participation were repeatedly demanded in the labs, often coupled with a specific call for better involvement of young people in particular. This already hints at the fact that the participants feel they are not being heard and their concerns not taken seriously. Politicians are urged to seek more direct contact with young people in particular, make their communication more accessible, and make better use of social media (or use them at all). In general, the participants demand political communication to be adapted to the need of different generations and socio-economic groups in society.

This recommendation is not limited to politicians per se. In general, our participants call for information on politics and political institutions to be made more easily accessible and communicated in a manner comprehensible to as many people as possible. While young Europeans are willing to participate politically, they don't feel sufficiently informed.

This, however, cannot solely be attributed to faulty political communication. If there is one concern that stands out and is shared by an overwhelming majority of participants, it is the demand to adjust and significantly improve political education. The demand to adjust curricula and increase and improve political education across all age groups was expressed in nearly all labs.



In our participants' view, political education should prepare people for an active role in democratic systems. Accordingly, the fundamental values and underlying functioning of democracy should be taught. Repeatedly, participants recommended political education to be compulsory across all age groups. Another important aspect that should feature in political education is critical engagement with social media and, in general, critical thinking. Social media were generally seen as a challenge, rather than a blessing, for democratic systems.

Summing up, our participants want to be heard, have better opportunities for interaction and participation in the political system, receive more (and better) information about politics and be better prepared for their role as active citizens in democratic societies.

The demands developed in the labs could hardly be more timely and to the point. Our participants' insights and experiences are consistent with much research on political education, specifically with an eye to the EU. Political education often fails to achieve the goals it should have according to our participants. While the EU increasingly features in curricula, students' knowledge regularly falls short of expectations. The EU as a political system is often discussed with a singular institutional focus. This is an experience many of us involved in higher education share: Students prior knowledge of the EU is, if at all present, often one-dimensional and limited to 'Brussels' and the EU institutions. The EU is hardly conceived and understood as the multi-level system it is.

Our participants also demand 'their' issues, central to their daily lives, to be better reflected in curricula. In fact, more involvement of students in the design and implementation of the curricula could make political education more accessible, interesting, and ultimately an exercise in democracy itself. Other forms of engagement with political content, e.g. through 'gamification', are also on high demand by our participants and have proven a useful addition in practice.

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Unfortunately, the implementation of these and many other good ideas featuring both in our labs as well as in research on political education in the EU often fail due to very concrete problems. On the one hand, teachers' flexibility is hampered by strict curricula and centralized examination procedures. Here, 'simple' memorization of basic institutions is often preferred, not least because it can be tested more easily. On the other hand, teachers are (through no fault of their own) insufficiently prepared themselves and often lack the necessary knowledge for in-depth engagement with EU multi-level processes. Below others, because the complex realities of the EU are insufficiently taken into account at University level, as well – specifically in programs for prospective teachers.

In order to teach and discuss complex political processes, a solid knowledge of these processes is key. Teaching the European Union as a genuine multi-level system, with its complex political processes, actors, forms of accountability is a very complex task. Here, a relatively simple understanding of the EU institutions and their cooperation is not enough. Teachers would need to be familiar with national and regional implementation processes, forms of participation and their deficits, issues of legitimacy, accountability and the complex division of competences across the different levels of our polity. That would be the basis for political education on the EU to develop a deep understanding of the political system and enable critical reflection on political and democratic processes. The task becomes all the more difficult, if political education is increasingly done by teachers who are not specialists in the subject themselves.

Improving political education on the EU political system requires a long-term effort of different actors, from politics to Universities and schools themselves. Nevertheless, some short-term improvements are possible. Political actors could engage more with students, not just those seeking office through elections and not just during their campaigns. There is also a task set aside for academics: They should look beyond their universities' walls, fulfil the third mission and engage



with the (young) public beyond their own seminar rooms. The ActEU Youth Democracy Labs have shown that both teachers and school students highly welcome this kind of interaction.

The ActEU project aims to contribute to improving political education through a toolkit for the educational sector. It contains resources for political education on the EU, templates for interactive workshops, videos and cartoons. This toolkit is based on our research and the insights and recommendations from the labs. The Youth Democracy Labs may be one way of involving young European citizens in scientific processes, concretely improving the conditions for preparing young European for their active role as citizens of the European Union.



Multi-level democracy and political trust in Europe: The role of the subnational level

By Felix-Christopher von Nostitz

The Horizon Europe project *Activating European Citizens' Trust in Times of Crisis and Polarisation* (ActEU) examines questions of political trust and democratic legitimacy in Europe. This article is part of a series in which ActEU researchers present their findings.

Multilevel governance is a key concept used to describe the functioning of the European Union. However, how democracy is structured in this multi-level setting is less explored, leading to a recent increase in the interest of multi-level democracy in Europe (Giegerich 2026; Sellers et al 2020). Given its quasi-federal non-state polity of still sovereign member states, democratic institutions are implemented and organised in very different ways at the local, regional, national and European level across Europe.

This blog post will look at how multi-level democratic institutional design differs at subnational level across the EU and how these features affect not only trust in politics at the same level but also trust at higher levels. We argue that design of democratic institutions at the sub-national level can foster trust towards subnational political institutions which in turn has a positive effect on trust at higher levels.

Systemic factors impacting trust at the subnational level

In contrast to the existing literature (Harteveld et al., 2013; Schakel & Brown, 2022; Scholte, 2019), our approach focuses less on individual-level factors such as a person's attachment to their region of residence or their interest in local politics, but on systemic-level variables of *decisional autonomy* and *democratic legitimacy* at the subnational level. Thus, we expect that regional political institutions will be more trusted in a context characterized by broader levels of autonomy of subnational authorities towards the national central power, and by a high degree of democratization of the subnational political life.

Our analysis relies on datasets covering the 27 EU member states between 2019 and 2023, combining multiple waves of individual data – emanating from the *Standard Eurobarometer* – and of institutional data – extracted from *V-Dem*.

Trust in one political institution influences trust in others

Adding data from the *European Social Survey (ESS)* to our study, we assessed the level of trust towards subnational authorities, the national government and the national parliament. Concerning trust in the national parliament and government we see a huge variation in our sample of EU member states but observe similar trends. Trust in both is particularly strong for example in Luxemburg, Finland and Denmark. In contrast, Bulgaria and Slovakia exhibit the lowest levels of political trust, with particularly low levels of trust expressed toward their national governments as well as their national parliaments.

We can hypothesize a relationship between the use of a specific type of voting system during legislative elections with more proportional voting systems (Sweden, Luxemburg and Finland) leading to higher, and majority systems (Bulgaria, Lithuania and Slovakia) to lower, levels of trust.

Figure 1 Trust towards the national parliament

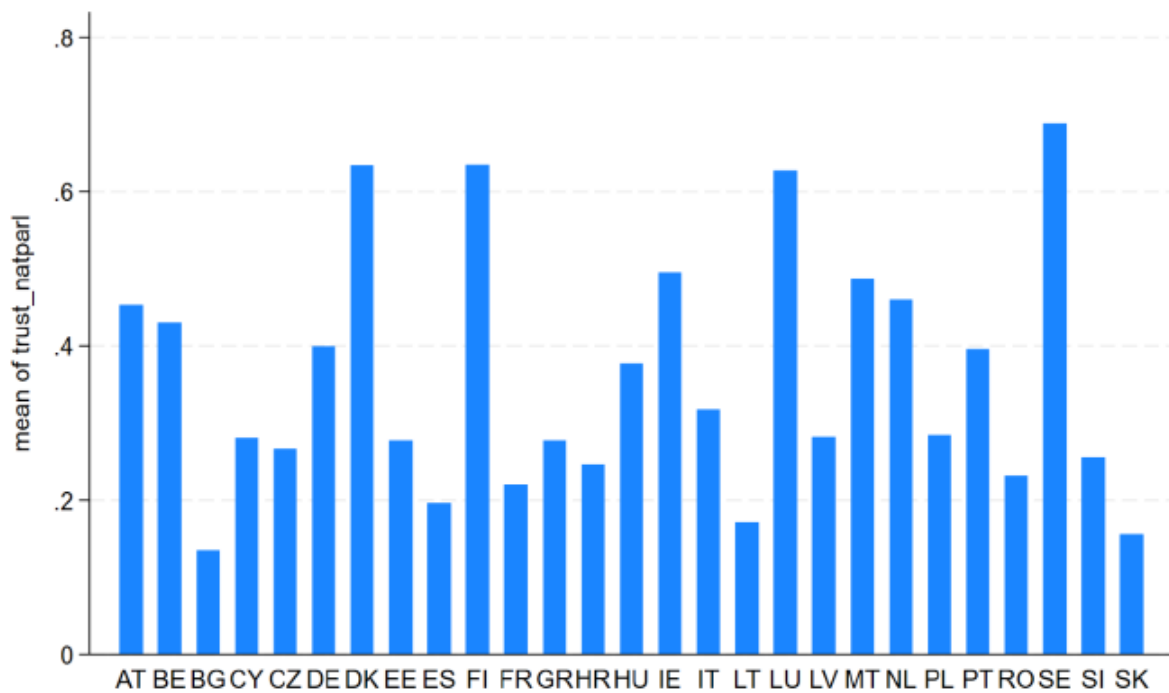
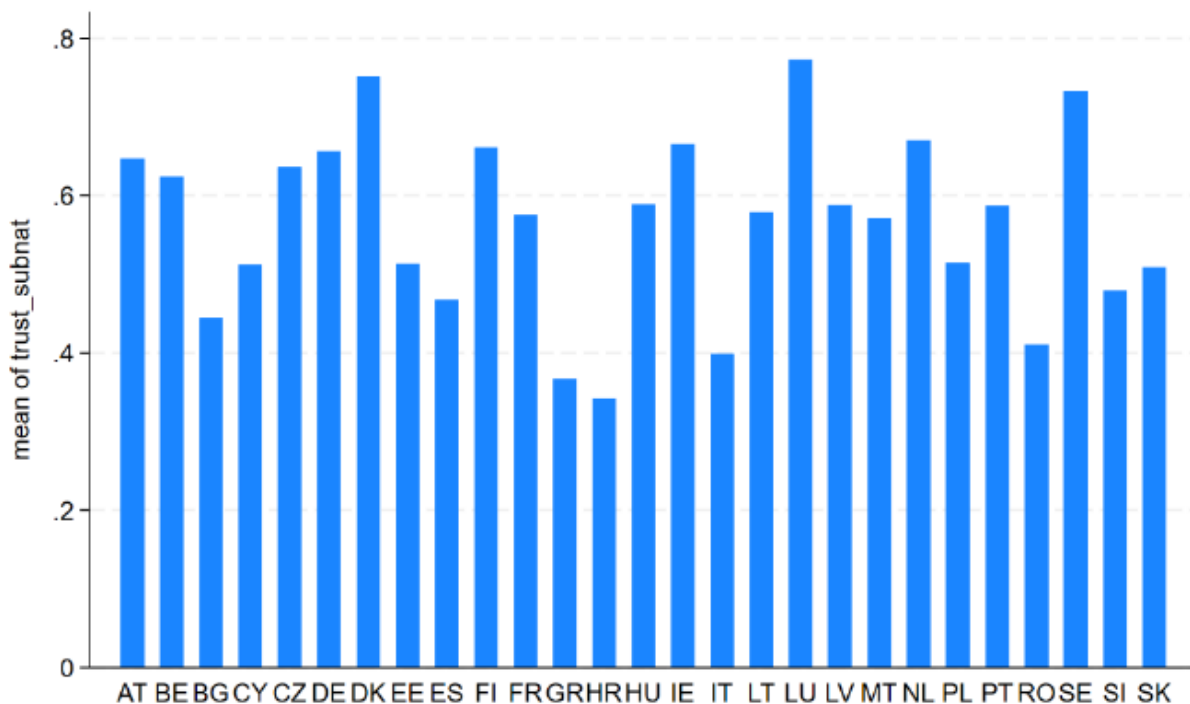


Figure 2 Trust towards subnational political authorities



Concerning trust towards subnational political authorities, we also see a huge variation but no clear pattern. For example, there are no straightforward differences between de-centralized and centralized countries. So, it would be hasty to establish, from our present descriptive analyses, a relationship between the (de-)centralized organization of a country and the level of trust towards subnational authorities. Thus, other factors such as formal level of subnational autonomy might be an important factor here.

Overall, however, we see that political trust in one institution tends to influence trust in other institutions – a tendency that becomes even stronger when both institutions operate at the same level of governance (such as national parliaments and governments) within a multi-level political system.

Subnational autonomy

Regarding our first factor of systemic conditions, we hypothesize that citizens will declare a higher degree of political trust towards subnational institutions when they enjoy *decisional autonomy* at subnational level. For an overview of the recent evolution of power relationships between central and regional (peripheral) governments, we relied on five items of the V-Dem dataset between 2019 and 2023. As Figure 3 shows, this period was characterized by a decline of the indexes related to the relative power of elected and non-elected political authorities at the local and regional scales.

Figure 3 Indexes of subnational governments and power relationships: EU members



Our OLS regression analysis shows that the relationship between subnational autonomy and political trust seems to manifest itself in diverse (and even opposite) directions in multi-level political systems. In regions with more subnational autonomy, political trust in subnational authorities tends to be higher, whereas trust in the European Union tends to be lower. Regarding trust in national governments and parliaments, the results are more mixed.

Overall, the findings suggest a linear trend: The closer a political institution is perceived to be to citizens, the stronger the positive influence that political-institutional factors have on trust in that institution.

Quality of democracy

To analyse the relationship between subnational quality of democracy and political trust, we focused on the political-institutional framework (de)facilitating subnational democracy and the dynamism of democratic life at the subnational level. In order to measure political-institutional



framework (de)facilitating subnational democracy we looked at the following political-institutional features:

- (1) the average freedom and fairness characterizing local and regional elections,
- (2) the lowest variation of freeness and fairness of subnational elections across different areas of the concerned country,
- (3) the lowest variation of the authorities' respect for civil liberties across different regions of the country.

To capture the dynamism of democratic life at the subnational level, we used

- (1) the de-centralization of the selection process within the parties (primaries) concerning candidates for legislative elections, and
- (2) the proportion of parties having permanent local sections.

Contrary to the relationship between systemic-level variables capturing subnational autonomy and political trust, we do not notice any sharp distinction depending on the level studied. Indeed, the general trend is that higher measures of subnational quality of democracy mostly tend to strengthen citizens' political trust on every level of the political system. This positive effect of subnational quality of democracy on political trust concerns both political-institutional factors and variables capturing the dynamism of subnational democratic life.

Conclusion

Our comparative analysis finds first that both subnational autonomy and subnational democratic quality have a positive correlation with trust in subnational authorities. Institutions that are perceived as transparent and inclusive foster higher levels of trust.

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However, the two factors have different effects on trust in the other levels of governance. In a phenomenon referred to as "zero-sum legitimacy", subnational autonomy may *reduce* trust in national governments or in EU institutions. Mixed results can be observed regarding the relationship between subnational autonomy and trust towards national parliaments. On the other hand, the quality of democracy at the subnational level *complements* trust in both national governments and parliaments and in EU institutions, indicating cohesion in democratic governance.

High subnational democratic quality fosters trust in all levels

Thus, the quality of democracy at the subnational level serves as a more robust predictor of public trust compared to the degree of subnational autonomy. While autonomy can enhance trust within local governance structures, it has the potential to fragment trust at higher levels of governance. A high quality of subnational democracy, on the other hand, reinforces shared democratic values at all levels.

This leads to the following two policy implications: First, to foster trust in governance, it is essential to prioritize the enhancement of democratic quality within subnational entities. This can be achieved through measures such as ensuring transparent electoral processes and promoting participatory governance mechanisms. Second, it is crucial to strike a balance between granting autonomy and maintaining cohesion in democratic governance to preserve systemic trust across different levels of governance and achieve multilevel democracy in Europe.

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This article is based on the chapter “Territories, identities and attachment: patterns and determinants of political trust at subnational level in Europe”, by Max-Valentin Robert, Giulia Sandri and Felix-Christopher von Nostitz, which is part of the “Report on how trends in trust among specific social and political groups, including ethnic and territorial identities, territorial attachment and regime types at subnational level impact on varying levels of trust across European subnational units” by Henrik Serup Christensen et al., published in March 2025.



What's trust got to do with it? Political trust, polarized opinions and climate protest in Europe

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Existing scholarship about how citizens' views about climate change diverge in Europe points to emerging polarisation, but not between climate denialists and climate believers (i.e. those that do not believe in the existence of human-driven climate change and those that do). In Europe the picture is more nuanced. While the vast majority of Europeans accept the existence of human-driven climate change, we do still disagree in important ways over policies: their type, extent, speed, and, crucially, costs and who should pay ([Caldwell, Cohen, and Vivyan 2024](#)). Yet this view is missing in research looking at how polarization on climate change relates to political participation choices and political trust. If we look at climate polarization using this lens, do assumptions that environmentalists are more trustful of political actors, and climate sceptics less so, hold up? And what does this mean for political participation choices, especially the choice to engage in protest?

For the [Act-EU project](#), we thus decided to try to investigate these interrelationships on the basis of a different operationalisation of polarization that is closer to what we know about citizens' views on climate change in Europe. Rather than deniers (a small minority) vs. believers (a broad and varied majority), we looked instead at political trust and participation choices amongst supporters of climate justice on the one hand, and climate sceptics on the other. For our purposes, climate scepticism groups denialists, but also those who question whether climate change is harmful or human-driven or question the need for climate change to be responded to through policies. To define the opposite pole, we follow work on environmental and climate justice. Supporters of climate justice are more than advocates for strong climate action. They underline the ways in which the impacts of climate change, biodiversity loss and other environmental crises are experienced to different degrees according to wealth, class, gender, ethnicity, geography, and more. They thus advocate for holistic approaches to climate change as a social justice issue, and challenge dominant environmental political discourses that shape action in Europe including the European Green Deal ([Machin, 2025](#)). This often amounts to calls for system change involving more substantive democratic participation elements.

In this blog I discuss some [preliminary findings](#) about polarized actors – climate justice actors and climate sceptics – and their political trust and participation choices, drawing on a first exploration of social media data from X collected during the project. This was exploratory work on a fairly limited sample of accounts in European countries covered by. I then offer some reflections about what the findings mean for EU politics and democracy.

Political distrust among polarized actors

To start looking at political trust among climate justice and climate sceptic actors, we identified X accounts held by environmentalist groups, then researched these to identify those among them that advocate for climate justice. We then looked at the machine analysis of their messages and how these had been tagged as expressing political trust or political distrust. A first point of interest to note is that when we looked at the whole group of environmentalist accounts including both more 'mainstream' groups and climate justice groups, we found no clear trends about political trust or



distrust. Simply being an environmentalist group doesn't seem to carry any implications about political trust, in other words. However, if we separate this broader group into mainstream and climate justice groups then compare them a trend emerges. Mainstream groups (for example Bird Life groups, WWF, or the World Water Council) write messages that express political trust, for example by describing political actors as honest, competent, and public oriented. What's more, these mainstream groups write fewer messages that express political distrust, presenting political actors as dishonest or incompetent. (The way the Act-EU project conceptualises trust uses specific descriptions for trust and distrust, rather than using the more common approach where trust is measured, but distrust is seen as just the absence of trust).

Climate justice groups (like Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion, or Last Generation), on the other hand, are less likely to write messages expressing trust in political actors, and more likely to write messages describing political actors as dishonest and incompetent. Approaching polarization on climate change issues in Europe using climate justice and climate sceptic groups thus seems to be on the right track: findings about political distrust among supporters for far-reaching action on climate issues emerges using this approach that would be obscured by a consideration of all environmentalist groups together.

While these findings on political trust among climate justice and mainstream environmentalist groups confirm what is already suggested in the literature, what we found when looking at climate sceptic accounts was more surprising. First, there are challenges in identifying climate sceptic actors. While climate justice and environmentalist groups are clearly organised around their actions in support of the fight against climate change, those acting to obstruct action on climate change are much less overt. In Europe today, climate scepticism has been found to be linked to right-wing populist and far-right political organisations and parties. Yet among these there is great variation on the public reasoning about climate scepticism (as investigated in-depth [elsewhere in the project](#)). To get a more accurate list of climate sceptic accounts, we thus decided that rather than assuming accounts from this part of the political spectrum to be climate sceptic, we would look at levels of interaction and distance between them and our climate accounts. This was decided in line with the architecture of X, which shows clear patterns of isolated networks around climate positions as well as being known as a space of antagonistic exchange, particularly in recent years ([Falkenberg et al 2022](#)). To find climate sceptics, it thus seemed logical to look at whether they had reacted to climate justice and environmentalist messages, as well as those most isolated from them. This left us with a list of accounts that was mostly accounts held by far' or populist right politicians, rather skewed to German and Polish accounts. Though far from perfect we still thought the findings about political trust could provide interesting insights. What our analysis showed was that these accounts had more messages expressing political trust, and fewer expressing political distrust. So, while our method of finding climate sceptic accounts seems sound in that it tallies with arguments in existing literature, our assumption that climate sceptics are distrustful of political actors is challenged.

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Polarization, political trust, and protest

We also looked at how political trust, positions on climate change, and decisions about political participation are [interrelated](#), albeit using different data. Here what we expect based on existing literature is that protest is linked to both ends of the climate change polarization spectrum. We know that there has been a [protest wave around climate justice](#) with the mass demonstrations of Fridays for Future and the civil disobedience of groups such as Extinction Rebellion, peaking around 2019. We also know that there has been rising [backlash to climate policy](#), linked to the populist right, with protests around low emission zones, fossil fuel taxes, and nature protection laws to name but a few.



Is this reflected in survey data? In some ways it is, though the view on what political trust means for protest is mixed. When we looked at the data from the Act-EU survey, we found first that respondents expressing trust in members of parliament were more likely to have taken part in protests. When we added polarized views on climate change, the link between political trust and protest participation appeared stronger and covered both climate justice and climate sceptic oriented positions (though these were captured in a different way in the survey, through questions about the respondent's opinions on climate sceptic and denialist positions and actors). Our analysis also revealed a higher likelihood for climate sceptics to take part in strikes.

The Act-EU survey also included vignette experiments about protest participation where the respondent is given a scenario where they are opposed to a climate policy. Here, we found that political distrust was more important in the general relationship between polarization, political trust, and protest. Distrustful respondents were more likely to say they would join a peaceful demonstration or even an occupation of a parliament building (a more contentious option). While it might appear that distrustful respondents are thus protesting against climate policies, when we consider the findings from our social media analysis it could well be that here we are talking about climate justice protests demanding more far-reaching change rather than climate obstructionism, since we found that climate justice accounts are more politically distrustful than many climate sceptic ones.

What this suggests overall is that protesters – whether they are climate sceptics or pro climate justice – are not necessarily always distrustful of political actors. The evidence is much more mixed. This belies some classical academic theories about the link between protest and distrust which attributes to the act of protest to those that feel a strong sense of grievance and thus distrust in political actors. Instead, our findings suggest something more nuanced in line with theories around political opportunity. Many protests are about taking advantage of a specific political context to make a claim. There is no single pattern or quality to protest and dismissing it as mere anti-politics or radical flank thus appears unwise.

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What does this mean for EU climate politics?

Our research is far from definitive but bolsters nuanced views in work on social movements and climate change. Both climate sceptics and climate justice actors protest, and there are complex reasons for that.

If we consider recent, apparently climate sceptic, protests, later captured by right-wing political forces, we can find arguments that concern climate justice. For example, the yellow vests protests and the farmers' protests of 2024 contain claims about distributive justice in the transition away from a fossil fuel-based economy (the Just Transition): they are about who should bear costs as well as about climate scepticism. In climate justice protests, we find clear demands about system change through the addition of mechanisms for participatory democracy in the form of citizens' assemblies. Sometimes these claims overlap, for example yellow vests protests also called for democratic mechanisms, and fed into France's 'Grand Débat' ([Ehs and Mokre 2020](#)), while populists also call for elites to listen to 'the people'.

Taking the nuanced nature of protest claims into account is thus important for EU climate politics. Protest, along with other forms of political claims-making, has always driven change in Europe, and how powers respond to protest has clear consequences. For the EU, responsiveness to protest through genuine mechanisms of inclusion, and a strong stance against member state moves to [repress climate justice protests](#), could be one key to build legitimacy and democratic credentials. This seems all the more strategic given that more climate sceptic protests linked with right wing populist actors challenge EU policies and the EU's power, while climate justice protests that are more



in line with the EU's ambitions as a global environmental leader have progressively ceased to address the EU, seeing it as an ineffective actor for real change ([della Porta, Parks, and Portos 2024](#)). This is, perhaps, what has driven distrust in politics for supporters of climate justice.



From seats to sentiments: what Austria teaches us about trust and representation in a multi-level Europe

by Ermela Gianna, Matilde Ceron and Zoe Lefkofridi

Why Austria, why now

Austria offers a revealing paradox that resonates well beyond its borders. The country's parliament has become more inclusive, with growing diversity among its members and increased attention to equality issues in parliamentary work. Still, some citizens feel under-represented and express only moderate levels of trust in core political institutions. In this short article, we discuss citizens' objective representation (descriptive and substantive) along with their subjective experience of representation and their levels of trust in representative institutions. Understanding how citizens' experience of being represented connects (or fails to connect) to their trust in democratic institutions shed light on the links between inclusion, responsiveness, and perceived fairness across levels of governance.

Looking at these dynamics through a multi-level lens, namely local, national, and European, helps explain why trust does not always follow representation. For the European Union, Austria's experience speaks to a broader question: what sustains legitimacy in a supranational democracy, where multiple arenas of representation coexist? The data underpinning this analysis is part of the [ActEU](#) project, which examines the relationship between representation, trust, and democratic resilience in the European Union and a spotlight on Austria is going to be part of the forthcoming book *ActEU: Towards a new era of representative democracy - Activating European Citizens' Trust in Times of Crises and Polarization*.

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What do the numbers say? Indicators of Descriptive & Substantive Representation

In descriptive terms, Austria's Nationalrat has become more diverse over the last two legislative periods. The proportion of women rose from 36 to 41 per cent, and openly LGBTQI+ members increased from roughly 1 to 4 per cent. MPs with a migration background more than doubled from 2 to 5 per cent – still below the roughly 8 per cent of Austrians with such a background. Youth representation remains limited, at around 6 per cent, and MPs continue to be drawn disproportionately from highly educated social groups.

This gradual diversification matters, but it only tells part of the story. When we look at what MPs actually do, parliamentary questions reveal a pattern of selective responsiveness. Gender equality and climate change are among the most frequent topics, each accounting for roughly 13 to 15 per cent of all written questions. LGBTQI+ issues also enjoy relatively high visibility, while migration and minority matters attract far less attention. These patterns reflect the political incentives and ideological priorities that shape parliamentary work (For more details and cross-country analysis see our [Report](#)).

Do Austrian citizens feel represented (across levels)?

Turning from parliaments to people, the picture becomes more complex. Survey data from the ActEU public opinion study show that Austrians' perceptions of representation are mixed. More than one in ten citizens say they do not feel represented at all, and about one third consider themselves only "somewhat" represented. Only around 20 per cent report feeling well represented.

Perceptions also differ across social groups. Middle-aged and economically disadvantaged citizens tend to feel under-represented, while linguistic minorities and the highly educated report stronger connections to their representatives. These feelings vary across levels of governance: some groups



perceive greater representation at the EU level, others at regional or national level. For example, respondents with a migration background may feel more seen in European politics, where they may feel represented through their own nationality, while those facing economic hardship often locate their representation gap at the national level, where welfare and taxation decisions are made.

These findings illustrate that representation is not a single-level process but a layered experience. People judge their sense of being heard according to where they believe decisions that matter to them are taken.

Trust in the Austrian Parliament (Nationalrat)

On a ten-point scale, average trust in parliament reaches around 4.5, with slightly lower scores for governing parties (3.9). Median values hover around 5 for parliament and the opposition, and 4 for the government. A striking 11 to 17 per cent of Austrians report no trust at all in these institutions.

To be sure, levels of trust vary across social groups. Women and middle-aged citizens show somewhat lower trust in parliament, while linguistic minorities report higher trust. Older respondents are less trusting of governing parties, and economically disadvantaged citizens express lower trust in the opposition – possibly reflecting disillusionment with political competition itself. Interestingly, citizens with a migration background and LGBTQI+ respondents tend to report higher trust in the national parliament than others, perhaps signalling a recognition of growing visibility in political life.

Across levels of governance, trust fluctuates rather than systematically declining with distance. There are citizens who doubt national politics but trust EU institutions, while others reverse the pattern. The result is a patchwork of partial trust, suggesting that positive experiences at one level do not automatically translate into confidence at another.

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Bridging the gap between representation and trust

What do these patterns tell us about democracy in a multi-level Europe? The first lesson is that inclusion in parliament – who gets a seat – and responsiveness in parliamentary work – what issues are raised – are both necessary but not sufficient for sustaining citizens' trust. Representation must also be recognised and felt. If groups do not see their concerns reflected in visible political agendas, or if improvements in descriptive representation are not matched by substantive engagement, trust gains remain fragile.

Second, the Austrian case shows how trust and representation interact differently across levels of governance. Citizens may evaluate fairness and responsiveness through the lens of where the locus of certain policy and politics are. For instance, while economic disadvantage hinders feelings of representation nationally, certain minoritized groups signal higher recognition at EU level. These patterns suggest expectations may be different across the national and local arenas than the EU one, matching the different competences and perceived stance on minorities rights across the two levels.

Finally, the mismatch between issue saliency in the public and policy debate can reinforce these tensions. The strong focus on gender equality and climate change in Austrian parliamentary activity reflects genuine progress, but topics that are highly politicized in discourse aimed to citizens such as migration find limited attention within the work of the Parliament.

Implications for a supranational democracy

For the EU, these insights highlight two broader implications. The first is the need for multi-level calibration of representation and trust. Efforts to enhance democratic legitimacy cannot stop at improving inclusion within national or European parliaments; they must also ensure that citizens



perceive consistency and coherence across levels. When representation feels fragmented, trust cannot easily flow upward or downward.

The second is agenda breadth. A democracy that responds selectively risks hollowing out its own legitimacy. If institutions only amplify issues that fit mainstream ideological comfort zones, they leave unattended spaces – such as migration-related issues in Austria – that populists and anti-system actors can fill with resentment. Sustaining trust, especially in a supranational polity like the EU, requires keeping open channels for those who currently feel unseen.

Austria's experience thus offers a microcosm of Europe's broader democratic challenge. Representation has expanded, both in who speaks and in what is discussed, but trust remains uneven and fragile. Reconnecting seats to sentiments – linking measurable inclusion to lived recognition – is essential for ensuring that Europe's multi-level democracy remains not only representative in form, but trusted in practice.



Out of Step? The EU's Difficult Election Dance

Alex Hartland, Daniela Braun, Giuseppe Carteny, Rosa M. Navarrete, & Ann-Kathrin Reinl

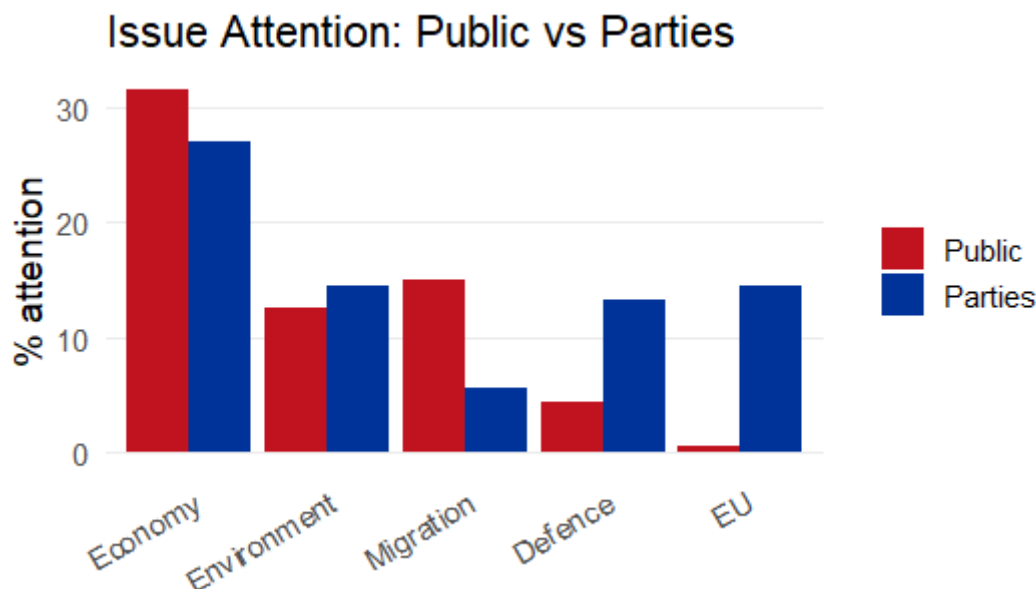
Introduction

It famously takes two to tango, but what happens when one partner is waltzing while the other foxtrots? The relationship between voters and parties is one such complicated dance, with high potential for misalignment. Do European politicians do what the public wants, and do the public even notice? In a recently published study of the 2024 European Parliamentary elections, we show that most parties are substantially out of sync with voters' priorities on a number of issues. Generally speaking, politicians like being popular and want to be re-elected, so doing what the public wants clearly makes rational sense. However, we can all think of examples where this did not happen, from the US and its allies' decision to invade Iraq in 2003 to recent efforts at reforming the French pension system despite widespread public opposition. While most governments would reasonably point to the need for pragmatism and broader responsibilities, a certain level of responsiveness is also important for maintaining the trust of the general public and legitimising their actions. This is a difficult balancing act for national governments, and all the more so for EU institutions. Using data collected as part of ActEU, a Horizon Europe-funded project studying political trust and participation in the EU, we set out to establish how in touch parties were with the interests of their constituents during the 2024 campaign, and whether the voters noticed this.

Which issues matter? It depends who you ask

Our initial research compares which issues the public say mattered most to them with the attention they were given by parties in their 2024 European Parliament election campaign manifestoes. We focus on five issues likely to be at least somewhat relevant to both sides: defence, the economy, migration, the environment, and the EU itself. As the graph below shows, the expectation that parties will rationally address the concerns of the public often fails to match the reality.

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Bar graph showing the percentage of survey respondents who said an issue was “the most important problem” facing their country and the percentage of European election party manifesto content addressing each issue

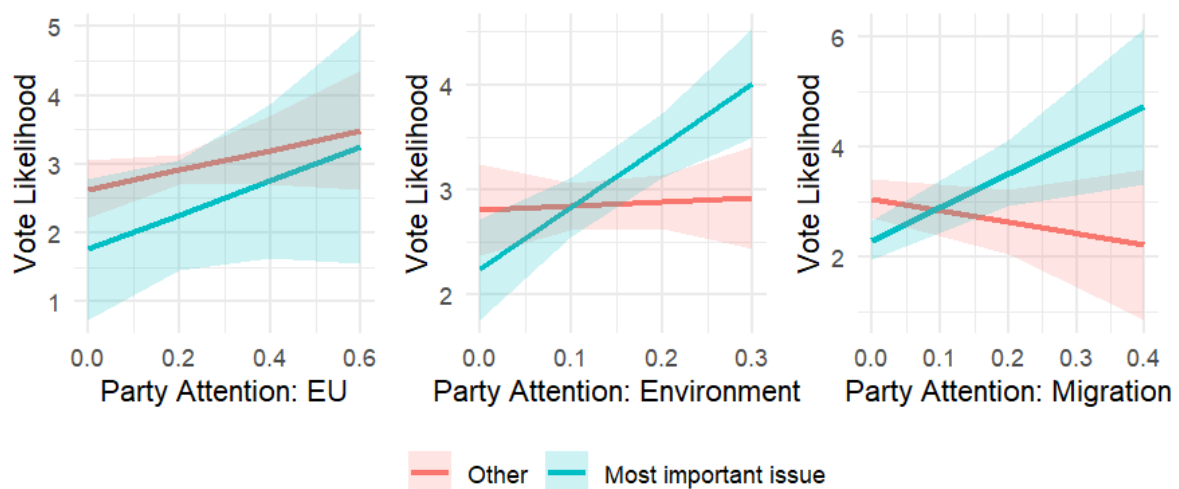
The most striking mismatch is in the respective attention given to the EU, meaning specifically EU integration, EU treaties, EU membership, or so-called *EU polity* questions. Parties, it seems, like talking about all things related to EU polity, from integration and expansion to the institutions themselves, while the public largely does not care. We also see smaller but still notable mismatches elsewhere, with the public more concerned about migration (15% of public responses vs 5% of party manifesto content) and the economy (32% vs 27%) than defence issues (4% vs 13%), despite the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. Only when it comes to the environment are individuals and parties more closely aligned (13% vs 14%).

For the 15% of voters who prioritise migration, it then becomes difficult to find a party which is addressing their key issue at the European level. Some may simply not vote, but in a worst-case scenario, the relative silence at the party level leaves the door open for extremists to grab public attention and potentially drive their preferences in a similarly extreme direction. Indeed, our research shows that the parties talking most about immigration during the 2024 campaign were Austria's FPÖ, the AfD in Germany, and the Danish People's Party, which all spend over 10% of their manifestos discussing migration. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these are all leading far-right parties in their respective countries. None of this is to say that mainstream parties should copy the policies of these parties, as indeed research shows such an approach can be counter-productive (see for example work by [Werner Krause and colleagues](#), as well as by [Teresa Völker and Daniel Saldivia Gonzatti](#)). Nevertheless, ignoring the issue or missing the opportunity to frame it in more positive or constructive terms may also come at a cost for centre-left and centre-right parties.

Listening and Learning

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Our research also shows that parties which do respond to voters by giving more attention to the issues which matter to them are more likely to receive an electoral reward. The graph below shows how likely individuals are to vote for a party given their attention to a particular issue, here for the three issues which were the main focus of our paper. The blue line shows the likelihood for individuals who say that a particular issue is important to them, and the red line is for those who specify a different issue is most important.





Line graph showing the changing likelihood of voting for a party vs the increasing percentage of the relevant manifesto addressing that issue. Blue lines show the voting likelihood for those who rate the issue as “most important”, red lines show the voting likelihood for those who do not.

The blue lines show that voters who prioritise the environment and migration are increasingly likely to vote for parties which give more attention to that issue, while the flatter or more negative red lines show no such relationship for voters who do not prioritise that issue. In fact, the only issue where this is not the case is the EU polity, where voters' priorities do not make a difference to their choices at the ballot box, ironic given the imbalanced levels of attention on this issue described earlier. Digging deeper, we found the connection to be strongest in France, Germany, and Denmark, while Italy, Greece, and Spain show a weaker connection, though we should not conclude a north-south divide on this basis.

This is only one study during one election, and we also should not ignore the idea that the relationship between voters and parties is a two-way street, with both likely to respond to each other. As always, correlation is not causation. However, our results are consistent with previous findings on the relationship between voters and parties at the national level, and we find evidence of this at the European level given certain country and issue contexts.

But what does it all mean? Lessons for future elections

What then should parties and the EU as a whole make of this? And what does all of this mean for the political future of Europe? With the next parliamentary elections not until 2029, parties and elected officials may feel they have little incentive to further improve their standing with the public without the attention of an electoral campaign. Nevertheless, a range of international crises increasingly transcend borders and necessitate a coordinated international response. In such contexts, the role of EU institutions in managing these challenges becomes crucial, particularly in areas such as migration and environmental policy.

On one level, our findings highlight a simple but uncomfortable reality: the issues that matter most to citizens are not always the ones parties choose to talk about or legislate on. Even when voters clearly care about topics like migration or the environment, these often take a back seat in campaign debates, while defence and EU issues take centre stage despite limited public enthusiasm.

This mismatch matters because it shapes which parties win votes. Across the nine countries we studied, parties which paid closer attention to the issues voters personally cared about tended to perform better, with topics like migration and the environment providing the clearest connection. In some countries, this was particularly strong: when parties gave more space to migration in their manifestos, voters who saw migration as a top concern were noticeably more likely to support them. That pattern was less consistent for other topics, and largely absent when it came to acting on the EU polity. But taken together, these findings point to the potential for European voting behaviour, where what parties say or fail to say in such campaigns can increasingly shape voter behaviour.

For parties, the dynamics described here create a dilemma. Talking more about the environment or migration might alienate some voters at the national level, but ignoring those issues risks losing credibility among others, or worse, handing the conversation to more extreme voices who are willing to fill the gap. Mainstream parties therefore face a strategic balancing act: they need to engage with voter priorities without being dragged into unproductive or divisive debates. And while there is a clear need for coordinated European action on cross-border issues like migration,



climate change, and defence, persuading voters of this remains a tall order. Shifting the focus away from “Europe” as an abstract idea and towards the practical benefits of EU action might be one way forward.

Of course, this is just one snapshot of a complex political dance. Expanding our analysis to all EU members and comparisons with previous election cycles would offer a more complete picture, and might reveal more about why patterns differ from one country or one region to another. Future research could also dig deeper into specific party families or voter groups, and analyse not only how much parties talk about an issue, but how they talk about it in terms of tone and positioning. These questions go beyond the 2024 elections, but they all feed into the same broader challenge: mainstream parties must listen to the mood music to ensure European democracy can stay in step, meaning relevant, representative, and responsive to its citizens in an era when both politics and problems increasingly transcend national borders.

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About ActEU

How can we conceptualize and empirically measure political trust and legitimacy beyond the usual survey question “How much trust do you have in the parliament?”? Does the multi-level nature of European representative democracies require an identical level of citizen support at the regional, national and EU levels? How does social polarization on key policy issues of our times –immigration, climate change, and gender inequality– challenge the political trust in, and legitimacy of, democratic political systems? And what can policymakers and civil society do to master these challenges? ActEU aims at finding answers to these questions pursuing two overarching goals: In phase 1, we map and investigate persistent problems of declining trust, legitimacy and representation in Europe with a particular attention to the polarization of societies and the EU's multi-level structures. Providing an innovative conceptual framework on political attitudes, behaviour and representation across Europe, we establish an original empirical infrastructure based on an innovative combination of methods and newly collected quantitative and qualitative empirical data (focus groups, experimental surveys, web scraping). In phase 2, these results will flow directly into the creation of a toolbox of remedial actions to enhance political trust in and legitimacy of European representative democracies. In cooperation with a newly created Civil Society Network, Youth Democracy Labs across 13 European cities and in exchange with political cartoonists “Cartooning for democracy”, we will develop context-sensitive solutions for all polity levels and some of the most polarizing policy areas, and craft tailor-made toolkits for both policymakers and civil society and the educational sector. Finally, we deploy a differentiated dissemination strategy to maximize ActEU's scientific, policy and societal impact in activating European citizens' trust and working towards a new era of representative democracy.

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