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Is Britain facing a crisis of political trust?

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In July, Labour's King's Speech promised to 'rebuild trust' in Britain. That's a tall order for Keir Starmer and his government. This year's British Social Attitudes (BSA) report found that trust in politics among the UK population has fallen to its lowest level ever recorded. Almost half the population (45 per cent) now say they 'almost never' trust government, up from 12 per cent since the question was first included in the survey, in 1986. Those who trust government 'always or most of the time' has fallen from 40 to 14 per cent in the same timeframe (Curtice, Montagu & Sivathansan, 2024).

The decline of trust witnessed in Britain is not replicated across all western democracies. Granted, in countries like Australia, France and the USA, citizens' trust in their governments has fallen over time. Trust has also fallen in countries hit hardest by the 2008 financial crash, notably Greece and Spain. Yet in many other west European countries, levels of trust have been maintained or even – as in cases like Germany and Sweden – increased. So, the deterioration of public trust in Britain raises two key questions: what has caused the drop and what are its likely effects?

Down the trust rabbit hole: But why?

One difficulty in identifying why trust in Britain has fallen over the past 40 years is the paucity of good longitudinal data. As a result, some factors likely to have contributed to declining public trust – such as how people judge politicians' behaviour – are difficult to assess. However, data from long-running surveys like the BSA and British Election Study enable us to explore how factors such as appraisals of policy performance, feelings of policy representation, media exposure and demographic characteristics might have affected trends in trust.

In my recent book on political trust, I drew on longitudinal data that shows that one reason for the decline of trust in Britain is that citizens have become more critical of the government's

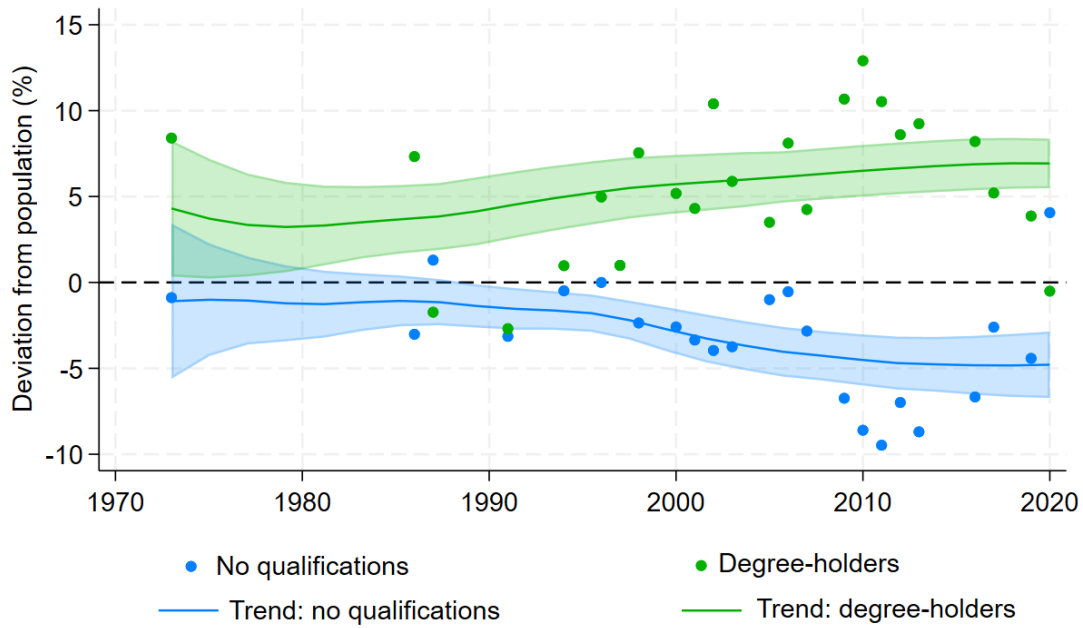
policy performance. Over time, public assessments of government effectiveness in areas such as healthcare and care for the elderly have declined. Moreover, these negative appraisals have also become more strongly related to people's feelings of trust. The population has thus become less trusting in part because people – rightly or wrongly – see government as less effective in delivering key policy outcomes. There is also some evidence to suggest that at recent elections people are particularly likely to be distrustful if they feel that the two main parties do not represent their policy preferences.

At the same time, I found little evidence that declining public trust reflects the negative diet of information and coverage provided by the media and captured in newspaper readership. Granted, readers of 'tabloid' newspapers – which are often supposed to foment distrust through their diet of political sleaze and scandal – tend to be less trusting than readers of 'broadsheet' newspapers. But over time, the effects of reading tabloid newspapers on individuals' trust appears to be minimal.

There is clearer evidence, however, that rates of trust have declined particularly among certain demographic and socio-economic groups. Figure 1 shows levels of trust relative to the whole population among those who have no educational qualifications and those holding a university degree-level qualification. Over time, we see a slow but steady widening of the trust 'gap'. Those educated to degree level have become, relative to the whole population, more trusting over time. By contrast, those with no formal qualifications have become less trusting.

A similar picture is apparent if we look at socio-economic status. Whether measured by household income, social class or feelings of economic difficulty, we see that, over the past four decades, economically disadvantaged individuals have become less trusting relative to the wider population and certainly to their more economically advantaged counterparts (Figure 2). Although the explanation for the widening trust gap is not wholly clear, it seems reasonable to surmise that declining trust among the educationally and economically-disadvantaged, reflects a growing perception among this group that political actors are not delivering for people like them.

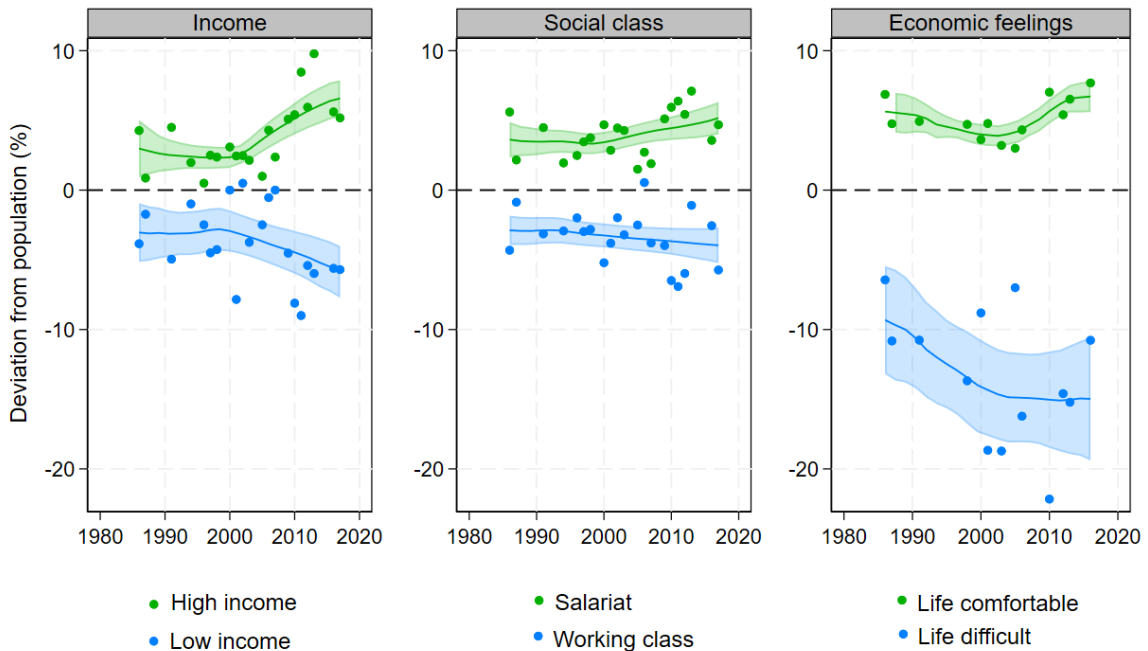
Figure 1: Trends in trust, by education



Notes: The dots show levels of trust relative to the whole population. Lines are trends. Shaded areas show 95% confidence intervals.

Data source: Protest, Dissatisfaction and Change survey (1973-74); British Social Attitudes (all other dates).

Figure 2: Trends in trust, by economic status



Notes/Data source: British Social Attitudes. 'Income' is reported household income; top/bottom terciles. 'Economic feelings' derives from a question about household income: responses are for 'living comfortably' and 'struggling'.

The decline of trust in Britain thus partly reflects a widening trust gap between the social and economic 'haves' and 'have-nots'. Yet there is little evidence that trust has fallen among younger age cohorts relative to older age cohorts. When it comes to age, falling trust is more apparent across the population than within it. This suggests that the decline in trust reflects 'period' effects – where an event or series of events affects attitudes across the population – rather than 'generational' effects – where changing attitudes are found among certain age cohorts but not among others.

In my research I identified a range of factors that have combined to depress rates of political trust among British citizens. Perhaps most troublesome is the erosion of trust among people on the social and economic margins of society. These individuals appear to feel that politicians are failing to cater for their needs or to represent their interests. In turn, these failures are often held to trigger public support for populist parties and for populist movements such as the Brexit campaign. Yet is low trust really damaging for Britain's political and civic health?

Should we be worried by the decline of trust?

Political trust is an important resource for any country. A good example is the Coronavirus pandemic after 2020, where numerous studies pointed to the beneficial effects of trust, particularly in motivating individuals to comply with official guidance and rules (Seyd & Bu, 2022). Yet trust is not everything. We can also observe that even in countries with low rates of political trust – such as Britain and Italy – public compliance with Coronavirus rules was high.

This alerts us to the fact that people might express distrust of their government without this damaging their civic attitudes and behaviours. We might assume that declining trust would trigger negative outcomes such as declining political and civic engagement, and attachment to civic norms. In many cases, my research shows that the observed effects of trust on people's attitudes and behaviours in Britain are minor. Indeed, I found little association between low trust and people's electoral participation; individual choices about whether to vote in elections are not substantially shaped by whether or not they trust politicians. Nor did I find a close relationship between people's feelings of trust and their tendencies to engage in

important civic behaviours. Rates of reported activities such as paying taxes, avoiding fraudulently claiming state benefits and serving on a jury, are all higher among people who trust British government than among people who do not trust. Yet the differences are not substantial. Moreover, while people's trust in politicians has declined, the importance they attach to such civic duties as obeying the law has not. Low trust does not appear to bring in its wake a significant unravelling of key civic norms and behaviours.

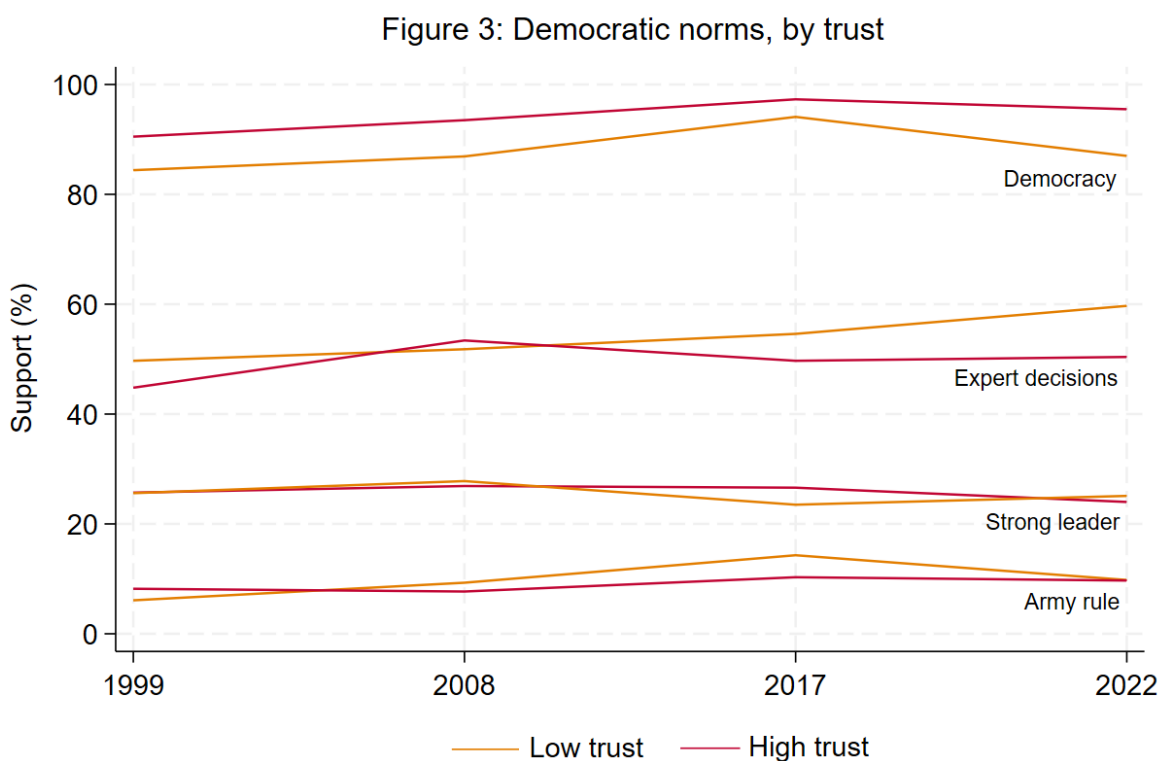
Trust is sometimes seen as important for people's willingness to grant government the leeway to take bold, and perhaps costly, decisions. Yet the evidence from Britain does not suggest that low trust stymies people's willingness to grant their leaders such latitude. Over the period since the mid-1980s, there has been little relationship between whether people trust or distrust government, and their support either for higher taxation and spending or for a greater state role in providing services such as healthcare. In Britain – unlike in the United States, where there is clearer evidence that trust shapes popular attitudes to the role of the state (Hetherington, 2005) – I find that people's support for active government primarily reflects their left-right ideological beliefs rather than whether they trust government.

What about two areas where analysts have raised more significant concerns about the potential side-effects of low trust: greater public support for system-challenging or protest parties and a weakening of people's commitments to democratic norms and practices? Prior to 2024, the high point of populist voting in British general elections was 2015, when the UK Independence Party (UKIP) won 13 per cent of the vote. My modelling of vote choices at that election shows that low trust was, indeed, associated with a higher tendency for people to vote for UKIP. A better test of the effect of trust, though, is to identify those voters whose trust declined over the year leading up to the election. When we examine this group, we find that they were more likely to vote for UKIP than were people whose trust rose over the same period. Yet among people who became less trusting, support in 2015 also rose for the Liberal Democrats (surprisingly since, at the time, this party was part of the coalition government). This suggests that voters who become less trusting turn not only to protest parties such as UKIP, but to more mainstream parties too. Indeed, when we draw on newly released British Election Study data to model the results of the 2024 election (where UKIP's successor party, Reform UK, won 15 per cent of the vote), we find that individuals' support for Reform primarily

reflected attitudes towards immigration and feelings about its leader, Nigel Farage, not whether their trust had declined over the previous few years.

Looking further afield, we might consider the spectacular populist triumph of Donald Trump in the 2016 and 2024 US presidential contests. This success undoubtedly owed much to Americans' distrust in government, which had increased since 2001 (Pew Center, 2024). Yet modelling the effects of trust on people's presidential vote choices over time shows that, while Trump benefited from a lack of trust among Americans in 2016, his Republican predecessor, Mitt Romney, benefited even more in 2012. As in Britain, then, low trust does not appear to push voters only towards system-challenging populist candidates; it also appears to stimulate support for more mainstream electoral candidates.

There is a modest link between people's trust and their attitudes to the democratic system. Figure 3 shows support in Britain for four different ways in which a country might be run: 'having a democratic political system', 'having experts, not government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country', 'having a strong leader who does not have to bother with Parliament and elections' and 'having the army rule the country'. Support for each option is broken down by whether survey respondents are low or high in political trust. The results show Britons' clear and consistent support for the democratic option, while support for the 'strong leader' option remains very much a minority taste. It is also clear that popular support for the different democratic options does not vary much by trust. In the most recent survey, low trusters were a little less likely than high trusters to favour democracy, and a little more likely to favour expert rule. But the differences are small, and there is no greater support among low trusters for the strong leader option. In Britain at least, democracy is for all, not just for those who trust politicians.



Data source: European/World Values Survey.

A trust stocktake

Over the past few decades, Britons have become less trusting of their political rulers and institutions. The same is true of national populations in some other countries, but by no means all. It remains unclear why people in some countries have become less trusting than people in others. In the case of Britain, we can say that the decline of trust largely reflects a combination of negative judgements about government policy delivery and political representation. Rising levels of economic inequality may also have fueled a growing distrust among economically and socially marginalised citizens.

This is troublesome, as events like the Coronavirus pandemic showed just how important trust is for a country. Yet we should not overdo the pessimism. The effects of low and declining trust on people's civic behaviours, support for active government and embrace of democratic norms are often modest. Rather than being panicked into trying to boost trust across the population, policymakers might be better advised to devote their energies to measures designed to reconnect Britain's social and economic 'have-nots'. If there is a problem of trust,

it lies in the disconnect of this group rather than in the supposedly negative effects of declining trust across the population.

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