

Trusting European Courts as a Last Resort in National Democracies

Marco Pastor
*University Carlos III of
Madrid*

Annelien Bouland
*University Carlos III of
Madrid*

Juan A. Mayoral
*University Carlos III of
Madrid*

Mikael Rask Madsen
*University of
Copenhagen*

Words 7,309

Keywords: trust, judicial governance, European Union, public opinion

Abstract

This paper examines the factors shaping public support for European Courts (ECs), specifically the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). It explores whether ECs are perceived as a last resort by individuals dissatisfied with domestic political and judicial systems. The congruence hypothesis posits that trust in national courts and the EU spills over into trust in ECs. We argue that this effect is stronger when citizens feel that democracy and the rule of law are in danger. Drawing on theories of trust in international courts and the role of ECs, we hypothesize that citizens who are dissatisfied with democracy and the rule of law in their country support ECs more when they (i) trust the EU, (ii) distrust the national government, and (iii) distrust the national judiciary. Using survey data conducted in Denmark, France, Poland, Spain, and the United Kingdom, we analyze cross-country differences in trust and legitimacy. Our findings highlight how ECs serve as vital institutions for citizens dissatisfied with domestic systems, offering insights into the broader implications for judicial governance and the future of liberal values in Europe.

El artículo examina los determinantes del apoyo público a los Tribunales Europeos (TTEE), específicamente el Tribunal de Justicia de la Unión Europea (TJUE) y el Tribunal Europeo de Derechos Humanos (TEDH). Exploramos si los TTEE se perciben como tribunales de último recurso por parte de individuos que están insatisfechos con la política doméstica y el sistema judicial. Según la hipótesis de congruencia, la confianza ciudadana en la UE y los tribunales nacionales

suele extenderse a tribunales europeos. Aquí argumentamos que este efecto aumenta cuando los ciudadanos perciben que la democracia y el estado de derecho están en peligro. Basado en teorías de confianza en tribunales internacionales y el papel de los TTEE, hipotetizamos que los ciudadanos que están insatisfechos con la democracia y el estado de derecho apoyan más a los TTEE cuando (i) confían en la UE, (ii) no confían en el gobierno nacional y (iii) no confían en los tribunales nacionales. Utilizando datos de encuestas realizadas en Dinamarca, Francia, Polonia, España y Reino Unido, analizamos diferencias de confianza en instituciones entre países. Los resultados muestran como los TTEE sirven como instituciones vitales para los ciudadanos insatisfechos con las instituciones domésticas, contribuyendo a la literatura sobre gobernanza judicial y el futuro de los valores liberales en Europa.

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Introduction

As economic and human rights integration advances, European Supranational justice systems started to play an important role in European democracies. Due to the cession of competences towards the European Union and the adherence to the European Convention of Human Rights, the Court of Justice of the European Union and the European Court of Human Rights (from now on CJEU and ECtHR, respectively) has adopted an increasingly important role of final instance when it comes to controversial issues as regards the topics of the Treaties and the Convention (Alter, 2014; Hirschl, 2008). Very often these issues have a high political as well as societal relevance due to its effects on the functioning of democracies, protection of certain groups, or impact in policies.

However, the gradual involvement of European Courts (ECs) in politically salient issues has brought about increasing contestation from certain political and social sectors to their authority (Zürn, 2014; Alter & Madsen 2021), generating certain processes of pushback and backlash against their power (Madsen et al. 2018). This is especially true among populist politicians who have increasingly attacked rule of law and international courts (Pech & Scheppele 2017; Madsen et al. 2018, Voeten 2020, among others) relying on two arguments. They claim that the judges sitting in international courts are unelected and their decisions are made in foreign countries against the identity, national interest, values or will of the people as other international organizations. Moreover, international courts, as their national counterparts, are defined as counter-majoritarian institutions and criticized for protecting minorities from the "tyranny of the majority" under liberal values and human rights (Mudde 2004; Voeten 2020; Madsen 2022).

This increasing backlash is worrisome for the functioning of ECs, as they themselves lack formal power to ensure compliance with their decisions (Pollack 2018), they need strong diffuse support (Easton 1975; Zürn et al. 2012) among the broader society. The public cannot close or withdraw from ECs on their own, but contestation of judicial institutions and its rulings among the public can trigger or amplify processes of pushback and non-compliance (Madsen et al. 2018). This allows for the belief that ECs, as other international courts, generally enjoy contested legitimacy as they become a prominent actor within the political playfield. Given the fact that there usually is no formal link between international courts and citizens (Lupu 2013), like elections, to hold courts accountable and replace judges, this is rather challenging. This situation is even worse in the case of European courts as they suffer from the same legitimacy deficit and are attacked by populist and euroskeptics for this reason as other European and international organisations.

Recent evidence also argues on the relevance of public support of judicial action, interventions or activism. International courts (ICs) are more likely to rule against national governments when their decisions are supported by public opinion in leading member states. In this regard, public support to courts' authority seems crucial to mobilize courts against state resistance (Blauberger et al. 2018; Harsch & Maksimov 2019).

Thus, the legitimacy of the international and European judiciary cannot be established on the sole basis of institutionalised design and procedures (e.g. selection of judges, transparency, etc.), but depends on public support or confidence. On the grounds of the literature about the impact of institutions on the development of political confidence and societal trust (Freitag and Bühlmann 2009; Zmerli and Newton 2007; Rothstein and Stolle 2003), we suggest that the role of European judicial power as a last resort institution is a key factor. More precisely, we assume that the extent

citizens foresee European courts as a substitute of their national judiciaries under democratic or rule of law crisis is important for their legitimacy.

This paper, then, tries to determine to what extent ECs' perception as a last resort is important for their public support. While congruence hypotheses expect that citizens extrapolate their trust in national courts to European courts, we claim that compensation effects from the national to the European judiciary are important in situations of democratic and rule of law crisis. Drawing on theories of trust in international courts and the role of ECs in addressing domestic failures, we hypothesize that distrust in national governments and courts enhances support for ECs when individual dissatisfaction with domestic democracy and the rule of law is high. The role of the European Courts (ECs) as courts of last resort extends beyond theory, being consistently reinforced in emblematic law cases, policy analysis and scholarship where European courts have emerged as a last resort or guardian of rule of law and democracy (Visser 2025; Bárd, 2019). Using survey data conducted in Denmark, France, Poland, Spain, and the United Kingdom, we analyze cross-country differences in trust.

Theorising trust in European Courts: Compensation, congruence or both?

The literature on institutional legitimacy has two contrasting strands. On the one hand, theories of legitimacy diffusion suggest that institutions like supranational courts can enjoy diffuse support that is borrowed from broad trust in other institutions and is not contingent on short-term satisfaction with performance. On the other hand, theories of legitimacy competition contend that supranational courts compete with national (and even supranational) institutions for public trust due to differences in doctrine, policy outlooks and interest, and also because they serve as checks and balances against other branches of government.

Trust in the EU can spill over to ECs because citizens often form attitudes towards complex supranational institutions through heuristic shortcuts rather than detailed institutional knowledge. As Voeten (2013) argues, most individuals hold only weak, indirect attitudes toward international courts, which are typically derivative of their broader evaluations of the political systems to which those courts belong. This mechanism mirrors earlier findings by Caldeira and Gibson (1995; Gibson & Caldeira 1995), who demonstrate that support for the CJEU is largely anchored in diffuse support for the EU itself. In low-information environments, citizens rely on cognitive heuristics (Popkin 1991) that allow them to map their general trust in a familiar institution—in this case, the EU—onto a more opaque or specialized one such as its judicial arm. This support diffusion reflects a broader process of institutional trust transfer, whereby the legitimacy of political institutions “cascades” down to their subsidiary bodies, enabling courts to benefit from the symbolic capital and normative authority of the broader integration project without needing direct public engagement or understanding of their work. In this way, trust in the EU functions as a heuristic anchor for trust in ECs, reinforcing their perceived legitimacy as integral components of the European legal and political order. The mechanism of trust diffusion is the basis for the first hypothesis, positing that trust in the European Union as a supranational political entity spills over into trust in ECs.

h₁: Trust in the European Union has a positive effect on trust in ECs.

In terms of national politics, we have two hypotheses. According to the literature on compensation (Kitzinger 2003) that frame international and European courts as an institution for fixing or substituting dysfunctional national courts or as a last resort, predict that individuals are more likely to trust international or supranational courts when they distrust their own domestic courts. Hence, trust in supranational courts might be conditioned by a negative assessment of national institutions and the political context where they operate such as a healthy democracy or rule of law system. Therefore, the worse the opinion of the national political system, the lower the opportunity cost of transferring sovereignty to the European Union or any other supranational institutions that can fix the national political system. In that case, “countries suffering from severe problems such as corruption, poor performance of the national parliament, low responsiveness of political parties, high structural unemployment, etc. may find the solution in the EU. On the other hand, countries with low corruption, an efficient democracy, a highly developed welfare state, etc., might be more reticent with respect to the integration project” (Sánchez-Cuenca 2000: 151).

Accordingly, distrust in national institutions incentivizes citizens to delegate to countermajoritarian supranational institutions. Following these general statements, we will explore to what extent the integration of European democracies into the EU multi-level system may be a consequence of the interplay between supranational and national politics, as Sánchez-Cuenca (2000) and Kitinger (2003). In this regard, we hypothesize that citizens who distrust national governments are more likely to trust European courts as they are considered, as national judicial institutions, a limitation to the abuses of power of distrusted governments.

h₂: Trust in the national government has a negative effect on trust in ECs.

In the case of the national judiciary, we can observe how the most recent empirical evidence shows how those who trust their domestic courts are more likely to also trust the CJEU (Voeten 2013). According to the congruence hypothesis, citizens extrapolate their trust/distrust in national institutions to the European institutions, that is, we can expect a legitimacy transfer where international courts borrow legitimacy from their national judicial counterparts. It may be a cognitive shortcut that enables the supranational court to tap into a national source of legitimacy (Grosskopf 2005). Moreover, given that they have very little information about the EU and its institutions, some citizens use information about national politics and institutions as a proxy to European politics and institutions (Muñoz et al. 2011).

h₃: Trust in the national judiciary has a positive effect on trust in ECs.

ECs as Courts of Last Resort in Democratic or Rule of Law Challenging Contexts

The second part of our theory involves the role that domestic institutions play in conditioning trust in supranational courts. According to theories of substantive legitimacy, public trust in institutions relies on citizens' satisfaction with how they perform their duties (see Gibson and Caldeira 1995). In this regard, and according to the compensation theories seen above, public trust in supranational courts can be enhanced when citizens are dissatisfied with the performance of their national institutions. Citizens who are dissatisfied with their national institutions often place greater trust in supranational courts because these are perceived as external guarantors of rights and the rule of law. In this sense,

ECs serve as a court of last resort. when domestic institutions fail. From a subsidiarity perspective, supranational authority is normatively justified when lower levels of governance prove inadequate to protect fundamental rights; citizens who experience low trust in national institutions may thus see European courts as legitimate precisely because they fill this gap (Weiler 1999; Stone Sweet 2004). This aligns with the credible commitment logic of (Moravcsik 2000; Simmons and Danner 2010), according to which states delegate authority to supranational bodies to tie their own hands, and public support such delegation to constrain unreliable domestic actors. It also reflects what Levi and Stoker (2000) conceptualize as substitutive trust: when confidence in one set of institutions is low, citizens transfer their expectations of impartiality and enforcement capacity to alternative authorities.

As we observed in hypothesis 2 and 3, the perception of ECs as courts of last resort is not merely theoretical; it has been borne out in several emblematic cases and documented by a substantial body of scholarship. The ECtHR has repeatedly intervened in situations where domestic institutions were either unwilling or unable to protect fundamental rights. Classic examples include *Hirst v. United Kingdom* (2005), in which the Court defended prisoners' voting rights against overwhelming political resistance, and *Dudgeon v. United Kingdom* (1981), which decriminalized same-sex relations in Northern Ireland after years of legislative inaction—effectively providing recourse to marginalized communities excluded from national majorities. Similarly, the ECtHR's jurisprudence on Turkey has offered minorities, journalists, and political dissidents a supranational avenue for rights protection amid weak domestic judicial independence (Cali 2018). The CJEU has likewise played this role, notably in its rule of law enforcement against Poland and Hungary, where domestic courts were subject to political capture. By asserting primacy of EU law and judicial independence (e.g., *Commission v. Poland* 2019), the CJEU has become a critical institutional counterweight to illiberal domestic reforms (Pech and Scheppele 2017; Kelemen 2020). More broadly, research shows that litigants and civil society actors—particularly minorities and rights-based NGOs—strategically mobilize supranational courts to bypass hostile or ineffective national channels (Alter 2003; Conant 2002; Cichowski 2007). In these contexts, the legitimacy of ECs is anchored in their capacity to act as external guarantors of legal and democratic standards when national systems falter.

Postfunctionalist theory further suggests that this kind of trust reallocation occurs especially in contexts of high politicization, where supranational institutions are framed not simply as distant technocrats but as protectors of liberal-democratic norms (Hooghe and Marks 2009). In this sense, European courts derive substantive legitimacy not merely from their institutional design but from their role as perceived neutral arbiters capable of enforcing rights beyond the reach of compromised national systems in certain political contentious contexts. In this regard, we predict spillover (congruence) or compensation effects either from the national or from the European level to European Court tend to be stronger in situations of dissatisfaction with national democracy or rule of law as suggested by Torcal & Christmann (2018) for the situation of economic and political crisis.

Hence, and according to the thesis that supranational courts act as a court of last resort, we hypothesize that the ECs' support gained from citizens who trust European and national institutions is conditional to their assessment of the national context where they might potentially intervene.

h₄: Dissatisfaction with democracy or rule of law increases trust in ECs for individuals that trust in the EU.

In contrast, for national institutions, satisfaction and trust are expected to interact positively because they focus on the same subject. When citizens are dissatisfied with their country's

democracy and rule of law but they do not trust their national government nor its judicial system, they are more likely to transfer their trust toward ECs as an alternative to their national institutions. Thus, satisfaction has a negative effect when citizens distrust their national government or judiciary.

h₅: Dissatisfaction with democracy or rule of law increases trust in ECs for respondents that distrust their national government.

h₆: Dissatisfaction with democracy or rule of law increases trust in ECs for respondents that distrust their national judiciary.

Data and Methods

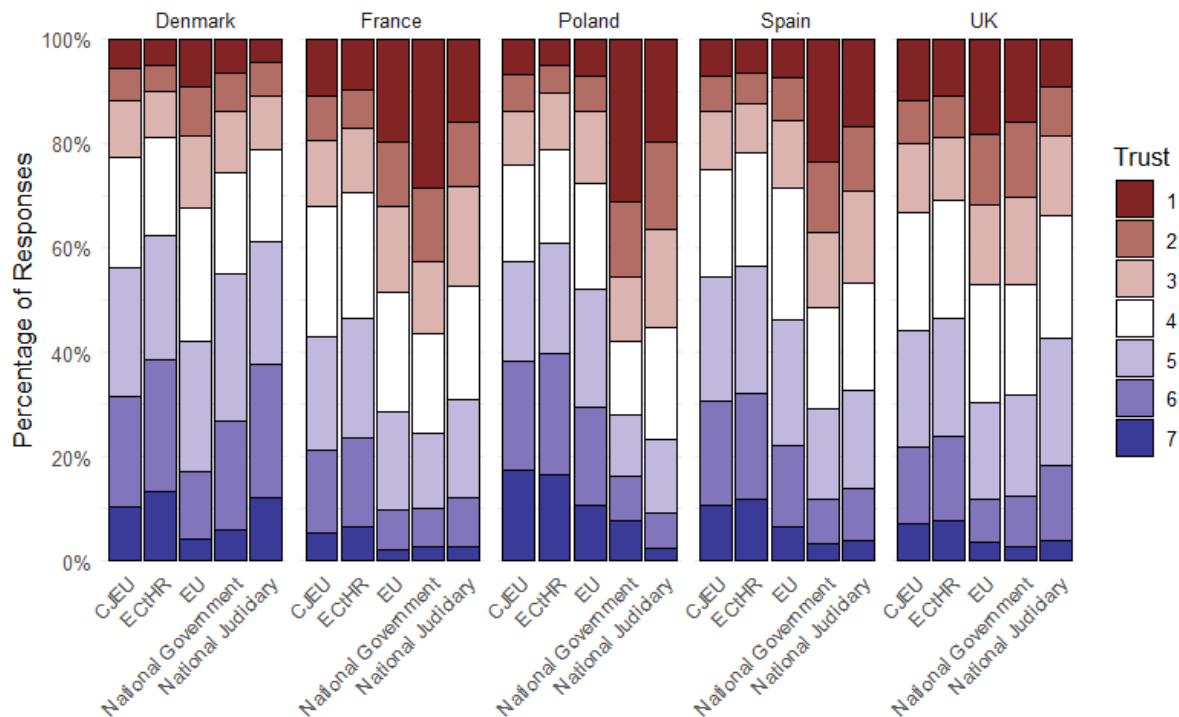
Survey and operationalization

The data used in the analysis consists of a cross-national survey conducted by Qualtrics from January 27 to February 27 of 2020 in five European countries: Denmark, France, Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom to a sample of around 3,000 respondents per country (Madsen et al. 2022).

The survey includes a matrix question on trust in institutions asking respondents “For each of the following institutions, please tell us on a score from 1 to 7 how much you trust them.” Here, 1 indicated “Not at all” and 7 indicated “Trust completely”. The subjects included in the item are: “Your National Government”, “The European Union”, “Your National judicial system”, “The Court of Justice of the European Union”, and “The European Court of Human Rights”. The two outcome variables derived from this item are trust in the CJEU and the ECtHR. The independent variables derived are trust in the EU, trust in the national government and trust in the national judicial system.

Figure 1 shows how trust in these institutions are distributed in each country sampled. There are several trends we can observe from the data that are worth noting. People generally trust ECs as most respondents indicated levels of trust above the midpoint. Meanwhile, the ECtHR tends to be trusted slightly more than the CJEU, possibly because respondents associate it with human rights as opposed to the more politicized EU. Relatedly, ECs are trusted more than the EU itself. We can also observe significant differences between countries in levels of trust. Trust in the national government and the national judiciary is generally low with the exception of Denmark. The most relevant comparison for our purposes here is between Denmark, where people trust the national government more than the EU, and Poland and Spain, where people trust the EU more than the national government.

Figure 1. Frequency distribution by country of trust in CJEU, ECtHR, EU, national government and national judiciary.



Both “trust in the CJEU” and “trust in the ECtHR” are used as dependent variables to measure support or legitimacy of Supranational judicial institutions. As we have indicated, trust in the CJEU and the ECtHR is highly correlated due to certain heuristic mechanisms in which, citizens lacking clear knowledge to differentiate between these two courts, normally include them under the category of European legal institutions dealing with rights disputes at the European level as they are not able to distinguish them due to lack of salience in media and public discussion. Hence, we can conclude that trust in both European courts are a measure of a single latent variable which can be defined as trust in supranational judicial institutions that monitor the enforcement and compliance with European law by national authorities.

The other two explanatory variables involve satisfaction with national democracy and rule of law. The questions were worded as follows: “In general terms, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [country]?” and “In general terms, how satisfied are you with the way the rule of law works in [country]?” Responses were recorded on a five-point scale from very satisfied to very dissatisfied. These variables serve as proxies for the performance of national institutions in the eyes of respondents.

The models also include several control variables. Gender is coded as a binary variable. Age is included as a continuous variable. Religiosity is included as a ten-point scale. Interest in politics is included as a four-point scale (same wording as ESS). Gross individual income is included as a ten-point ordinal scale. Furthermore, the models include country fixed effects. Finally, we are also controlling by social trust as an antecedent factor contributing to both national and international legitimacy beliefs (Dellmuth and Tallberg 2020), using the same wording and scale as ESS.

Methodology

The main analyses consist of proportional odds logistic regressions (POLR) models predicting the likelihood that a respondent will respond to each scale on the item for trust in ECs. This method is designed to model ordered categorical response variables where the outcome categories have a natural ranking but unknown or equal distances between them (e.g., levels of trust ranging from “none at all” to “a great deal”). Unlike linear regressions or multinomial logistic regression, POLR explicitly accounts for the ordinal structure of the dependent variable. The model estimates the log odds of being at or below each response threshold, assuming that the effect of the predictors is proportional across all thresholds (McCullagh 1980). This yields a single set of coefficients that shifts the cumulative probability distribution of the response variable rather than estimating separate effects for each category (Agresti 2010). POLR is therefore well suited for analyzing modelling variables like attitudinal survey data where responses reflect an underlying latent continuum but where it is not appropriate to assume equal spacing between categories.

Since this method assumes proportional odds, the estimated effect of each predictor is the same across all cutpoints of the ordered outcome. For example, if male gender has a coefficient of 1, this implies that men are more likely to be in a higher trust category toward the ECs by a factor of $e^1=2.72$. A coefficient of 0 would mean that the response probabilities are the same for men and women, given that the odds ratio is $e^0=1$. And a coefficient of -1 would imply that men’s response is more likely to be in a lower category by a factor of $e^{-1}=0.36$.

Results

The results from the POLR models estimating the direct effects of trust in the EU, national government and national judiciary are outlined in Table 1 (Table A1 shows the full results). Trust in people has a significant positive effect ($b = 0.069$, $p<0.001$), reflecting the diffusion of generalized trust across political institutions (Dellmuth and Tallberg 2020). Regarding the controls, trust in ECs is higher among respondents that are women, older, less religious and more interested in politics. Income interestingly does not have a significant effect. There is also significant country-level variation, with trust in ECs highest in Poland, followed by Denmark, France, Spain and the UK.

Table 1. Proportional odds logistic regression models predicting trust in ECs.

	Trust in ECs					
	CJEU			ECtHR		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Trust in EU	1.033***	1.056***	0.960***	0.875***	0.878***	0.778***
	(0.014)	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.013)	(0.014)	(0.014)
Trust in National Government		-0.054***	-0.195***		-0.006	-0.131***
		(0.010)	(0.011)		(0.010)	(0.011)
Trust in National Judiciary			0.447***			0.414***
			(0.013)			(0.013)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Log Likelihood	-21,992.2	-21,975.3	-21,330.5	-22,707.9	-22,705.4	-22,133.4
Num. obs.	14,831	14,830	14,822	14,839	14,837	14,828

Moving on to the explanatory variables, trust in the EU has a significant positive effect, which supports the spill over mechanism from H1. Looking at Models 3 and 6, with all variables, a 1-point increase in trust in the EU increases the probability of trusting the CJEU more by a factor of 2.61 ($b = 0.960$, $p < 0.001$) and by 2.18 for the ECtHR ($b = 0.778$, $p < 0.001$). For comparison, the effect of trust in people is only 1.07 ($b = 0.069$, $p < 0.001$). At the national level, we find that trust in government has a negative effect while trust in the judiciary has a positive effect. Trust in the national government reduces trust by a factor of 0.82 for the CJEU ($b = -0.195$, $p < 0.001$) and -0.131 for the ECtHR ($b = -0.131$, $p < 0.001$). This supports the compensation mechanism from H2, suggesting that the national governments compete with the ECs for institutional legitimacy.¹ In contrast, trust in the national judiciary has the opposite effect: increasing trust by 1.56 for the CJEU ($b = 0.447$, $p < 0.001$) and 1.51 for the ECtHR ($b = 0.414$, $p < 0.001$). This is in line with the congruence mechanisms from H3: in the case of the national judiciary, institutional trust tends to be transferred to ECs, suggesting that in the eyes of the public, there is less of a distinction between national and supranational legitimacy when it comes to the judiciary.

Next, Table 2 shows how the effect of EU trust is conditioned by satisfaction with national democracy and rule of law. In line with H4, the significantly negative interaction coefficients indicate that respondents who trust the EU but are dissatisfied with their national institutions tend to be even more trusting of ECs. This interaction holds for both the CJEU as well as the ECtHR. To visualize these effects, Figure 2 illustrates the predicted probabilities of trust in ECs based on the interaction between EU trust and satisfaction with national institutions. The impact of the interaction is most clearly apparent among respondents that “trust completely” the EU, among whom there is substantial variation. Compared to those that are “very satisfied” with their country’s democracy and rule of law, respondents that are “very dissatisfied” were 11-12% more likely to say they completely trusted ECs. These effects reflect how respondents that are alienated from national institutions tend to see ECs as a court of last resort.

¹ We also examine how trust in the national judiciary affects trust in the national government in order to test whether this compensation is dynamic. While trust in the CJEU has a negative effect on trust in the national government as we just showed, trust in the national judiciary has a positive effect on trust in the national government. This finding suggests two contrasting mechanisms at play regarding how citizens place their trust in different political and judicial institutions. While in the case of the CJEU seems to be related to the idea of compensation, In the case of the national judiciary we observe a legitimacy transfer or congruence as it is part of the same governmental institutional regime as the government.

Table 2. Proportional odds logistic regression models predicting trust in ECs including interactions of trust in EU with satisfaction with democracy and rule of law.

	Trust in ECs			
	CJEU		ECtHR	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Trust in EU	1.028***	1.049***	0.854***	0.884***
	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.027)	(0.027)
Trust in National Government	-0.174***	-0.181***	-0.110***	-0.117***
	(0.013)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Trust in National Judiciary	0.453***	0.455***	0.420***	0.421***
	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.013)
Satisfaction with Democracy	0.036		0.046	
	(0.035)		(0.035)	
Satisfaction with Rule of Law		0.085*		0.110**
		(0.035)		(0.035)
Trust in EU x ...				
... Satisfaction with Democracy	-0.024**		-0.026***	
	(0.008)		(0.008)	
... Satisfaction with Rule of Law		-0.031***		-0.037***
		(0.008)		(0.008)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Log Likelihood	-21316.4	-21314.9	-22118.5	-22115.0
Num. obs.	14,818	14,818	14,824	14,824

Figure 2. Predicted probabilities for trust in ECs based on the effects of EU trust and satisfaction with national democracy and rule of law.

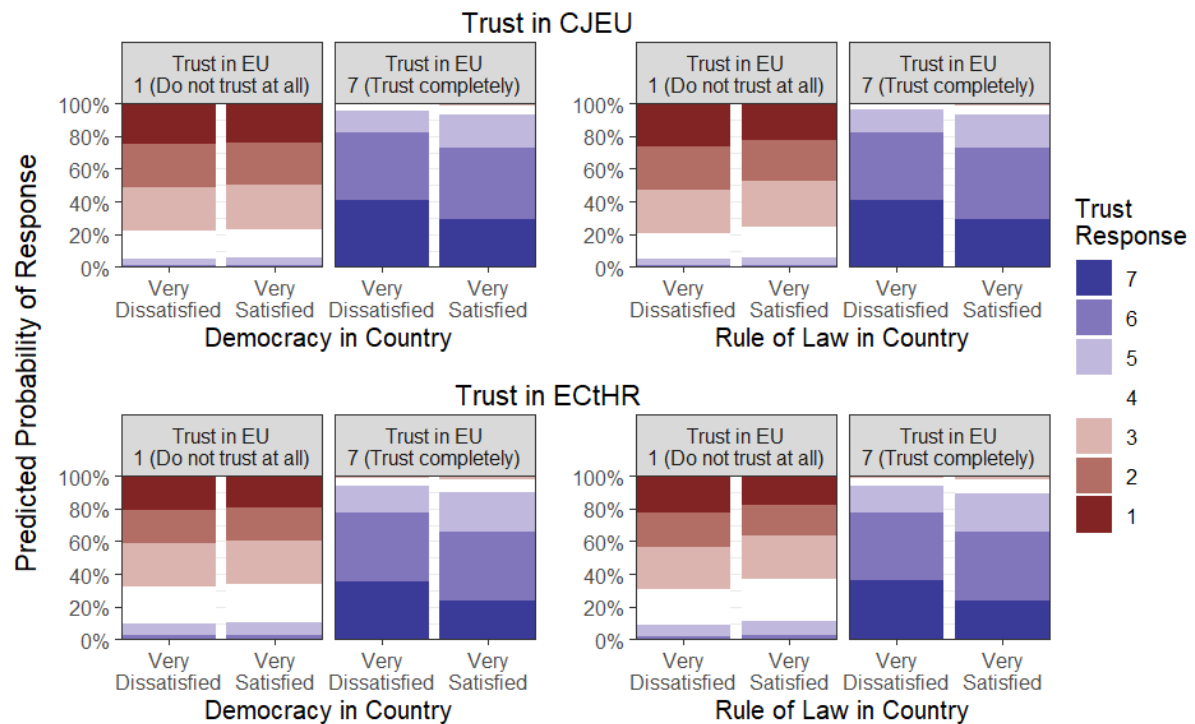
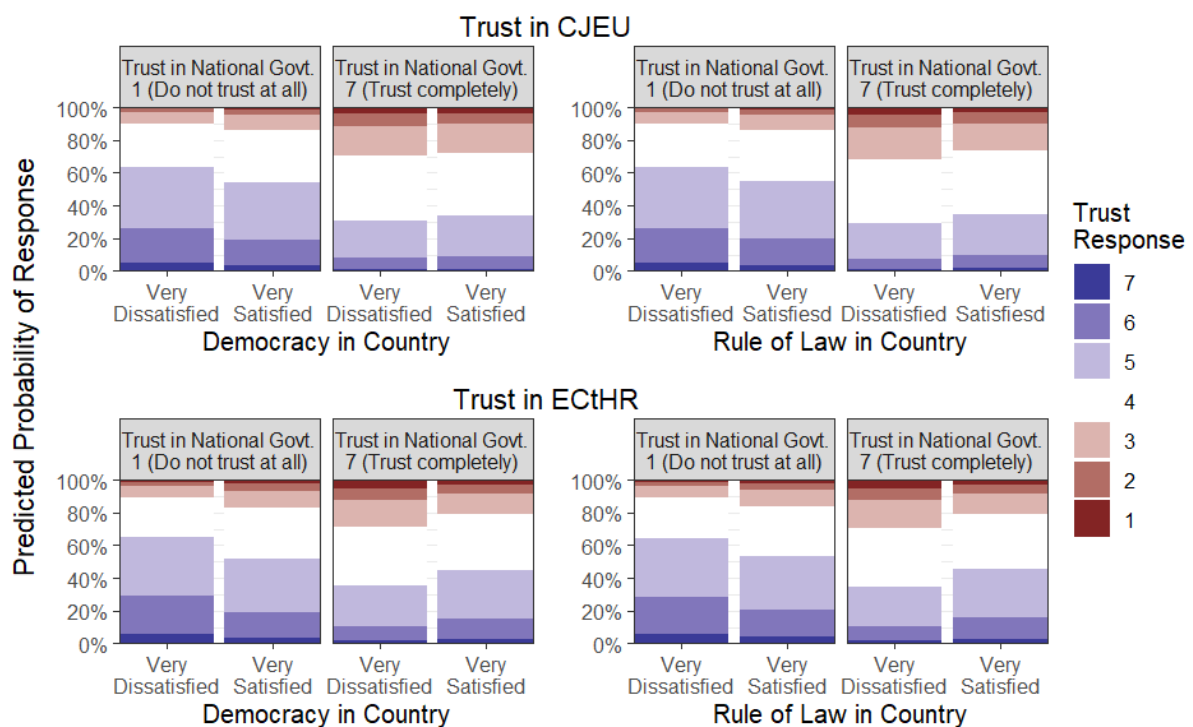


Table 3 repeats these interactions with trust in national government and the predicted probabilities are shown in Figure 3. The interactive effects are consistently positive for the CJEU and ECtHR with both satisfaction with democracy and rule of law. In line with H5, respondents who are dissatisfied with their country's democracy and rule of law, and also distrust their national government, tend to trust ECs more. This reinforces the notion that ECs are perceived as a court of last resort for citizens that feel alienated from their national institutions as part of a compensation mechanism. Conversely, dissatisfaction reduces trust in ECs for respondents that trust the national government more. This implies that when citizens are unhappy with politics, they are more likely to differentiate their levels of trust across political institutions. In other words, institutions need to compete more for public trust in contexts of low public satisfaction.

Table 3. Proportional odds logistic regression models predicting trust in ECs including interactions of trust in national government with satisfaction with democracy and rule of law.

	Trust in ECs			
	CJEU		ECtHR	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Trust in EU	0.957*** (0.015)	0.956*** (0.015)	0.775*** (0.014)	0.774*** (0.014)
Trust in National Government	-0.245*** (0.029)	-0.263*** (0.028)	-0.246*** (0.029)	-0.242*** (0.028)
Trust in National Judiciary	0.452*** (0.013)	0.454*** (0.013)	0.420*** (0.013)	0.421*** (0.013)
Satisfaction with Democracy	-0.118*** (0.031)		-0.179*** (0.030)	
Satisfaction with Rule of Law		-0.112*** (0.032)		-0.149*** (0.031)
Trust in National Government x ...				
... Satisfaction with Democracy	0.021** (0.008)		0.040*** (0.008)	
... Satisfaction with Rule of Law		0.025** (0.008)		0.038*** (0.008)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Log Likelihood	-21,317.4	-21,317.7	-22,111.0	-22,114.3
Num. obs.	14,818	14,818	14,824	14,824

Figure 3. Predicted probabilities for trust in ECs based on the effects of trust in national government and satisfaction with national democracy and rule of law.

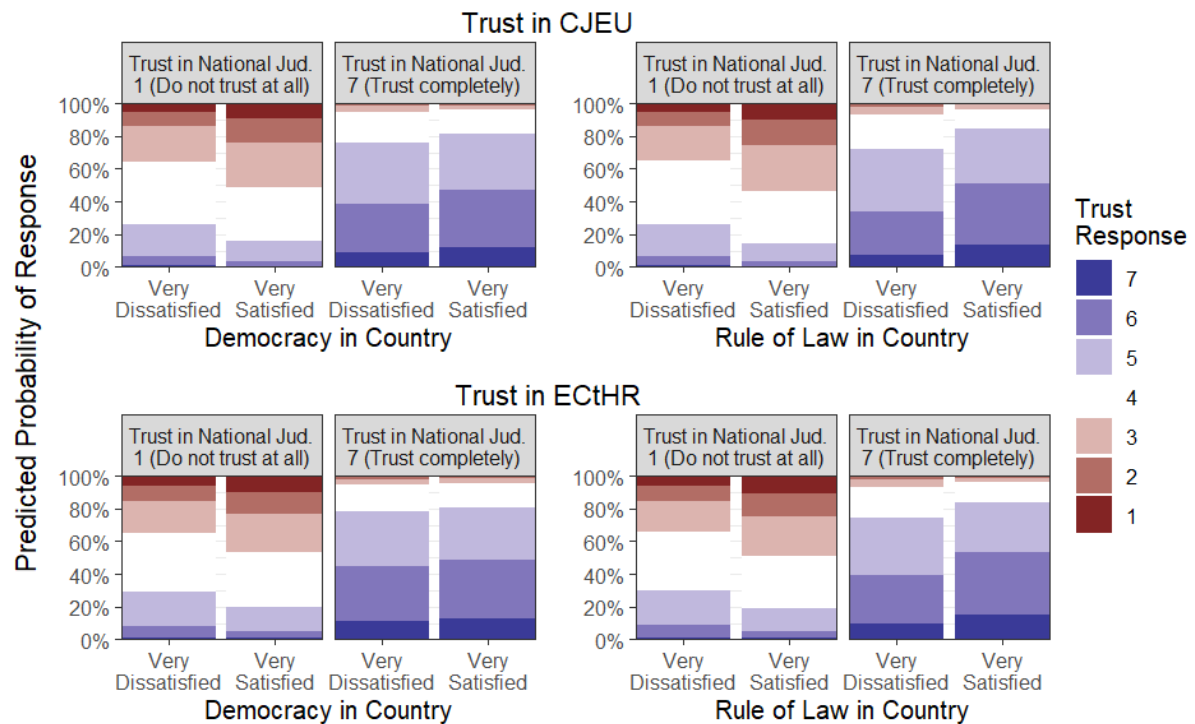


Lastly, Table 4 outlines the interactions of trust in the national judiciary with satisfaction in national democracy and rule of law, with the predicted probabilities shown in Figure 4. The interaction has a consistently significant positive effect, while satisfaction has a negative direct effect. As a result, dissatisfaction increases trust in ECs for respondents that distrust their national judiciary, while reducing it for those that trust in their national judiciary. Again, this reflects how citizens who are dissatisfied with politics tend to differentiate more their trust in institutions. When they distrust the national judiciary, ECs become the court of last resort that they trust. But when they do trust it, the ECs are simply an alternative that is just as good.

Table 4. Proportional odds logistic regression models predicting trust in ECs including interactions of trust in national judiciary with satisfaction with democracy and rule of law.

	Trust in ECs			
	CJEU		ECtHR	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Trust in EU	0.954*** (0.015)	0.953*** (0.015)	0.774*** (0.014)	0.773*** (0.014)
Trust in National Government	-0.178*** (0.013)	-0.186*** (0.012)	-0.114*** (0.012)	-0.124*** (0.012)
Trust in National Judiciary	0.329*** (0.027)	0.270*** (0.027)	0.339*** (0.027)	0.276*** (0.027)
Satisfaction with Democracy	-0.198*** (0.034)		-0.147*** (0.033)	
Satisfaction with Rule of Law		-0.250*** (0.034)		-0.199*** (0.034)
Trust in National Judiciary x ...				
... Satisfaction with Democracy	0.040*** (0.008)		0.026*** (0.008)	
... Satisfaction with Rule of Law		0.061*** (0.008)		0.048*** (0.008)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Log Likelihood	-21307.6	-21292.6	-22118.6	-22107.1
Num. obs.	14,818	14,818	14,824	14,824

Figure 4. Predicted probabilities for trust in ECs based on the effects of trust in national judiciary and satisfaction with national democracy and rule of law.



Conclusion

As European integration continues to take course, public trust in European courts will play a crucial role in the legitimation of supranational governing institutions. Thus, a growing literature is dedicated to identifying the drivers of trust in ECs with two contrasting theoretical strands worth highlighting. On the one hand, theories of congruence posit that institutional legitimacy tends to be diffuse, so people tend to have similar levels of trust across different branches of government because they have difficulty making differential assessments. On the other hand, theories of compensation contend that institutions compete for legitimacy, so public trust in one institution tends to come at the expense of another.

This study develops and tests these theories of institutional legitimacy for ECs regarding the influence of trust and satisfaction with European and national political institutions. The results point to several findings. First, trust in the EU is closely associated with trust in ECs, suggesting that citizens tend to have a general attitude towards European institutions instead of having more specific assessments. Moreover, national governments appear to compete with European institutions for public trust. Interestingly, though, national judiciaries do not appear to compete with supranational courts for trust, but rather share a diffuse trust in the legal system. Overall this suggests that ECs can compete for legitimacy with institutions that are more distinct from them, like national executives, but they can also benefit from the diffusion of general attitudes toward institutions that are closer to them, like the EU or the broader legal system. Second, based on the results, political dysfunction tends to exacerbate compensation between national and supranational institutions. Respondents

who are dissatisfied with politics trust ECs more if they trust the EU, but trust them less when they trust their national government or national judiciary more.

These findings have limitations related to causal identification and generalizability. Despite the distinct operationalization of variables and the large strength of the results, there is potential endogeneity and multicollinearity. For example, a broader and latent factor of social trust may make trust in—as well as satisfaction with—political institutions highly correlated. Still, this may sufficiently be addressed by our inclusion of trust in people as a control. Moreover, the observational and cross-sectional nature of the data means that we cannot rule out the possibility of reverse causality (trust in ECs contributing to trust and satisfaction with supra/national institutions). Nevertheless, we believe that the results provide relevant insights into the dynamics that are driving public trust in ECs given the magnitude and statistical significance of the effects.

The main implication of the findings regarding governance is that public trust is a positive-sum game when citizens have a positive perception of politics, but trust becomes a scarce resource that political institutions must compete for in cases of dysfunction, crisis and dissatisfaction. This is especially relevant for contexts of multi-level governance like the EU, where there is an interplay of national and supranational (and regional) institutions that can be characterized by cooperation and coordination as much as rivalry and competition.

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Appendix Tables

Table A1. Proportional odds logistic regression models predicting trust in ECs.

	Trust in ECs					
	CJEU			ECtHR		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Trust in EU	1.033***	1.056***	0.960***	0.875***	0.878***	0.778***
	(0.014)	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.013)	(0.014)	(0.014)
Trust in National Government		-0.054***	-0.195***		-0.006	-0.131***
		(0.010)	(0.011)		(0.010)	(0.011)
Trust in National Judiciary			0.447***			0.414***
			(0.013)			(0.013)
Trust in People	0.110***	0.119***	0.069***	0.117***	0.118***	0.069***
	(0.010)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.010)	(0.011)	(0.011)
National Identification	-0.031***	-0.023**	-0.053***	-0.004	-0.003	-0.031***
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)
Regional Identification	0.042***	0.042***	0.045***	0.034***	0.034***	0.037***
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)
European Identification	0.122***	0.118***	0.121***	0.099***	0.099***	0.099***
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)
Male (Ref. = Female)	-0.057	-0.051	-0.076*	-0.086**	-0.085**	-0.107***
	(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.031)
Age	0.006***	0.006***	0.006***	0.007***	0.007***	0.006***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Interest in Politics	0.117***	0.122***	0.121***	0.182***	0.183***	0.189***
	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.019)
Religiosity	-0.035***	-0.032***	-0.033***	-0.033***	-0.033***	-0.034***
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Income	0.005	0.006	0.001	-0.005	-0.005	-0.010
	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Country (Ref. = Denmark)						
France	0.012	-0.028	0.127*	-0.161**	-0.166**	-0.033
	(0.050)	(0.050)	(0.051)	(0.050)	(0.050)	(0.051)
Poland	-0.184***	-0.256***	0.229***	-0.258***	-0.266***	0.188***
	(0.050)	(0.052)	(0.054)	(0.050)	(0.052)	(0.054)
Spain	-0.303***	-0.345***	-0.062	-0.380***	-0.385***	-0.117*
	(0.050)	(0.051)	(0.052)	(0.050)	(0.051)	(0.052)
UK	-0.017	-0.042	-0.008	-0.239***	-0.241***	-0.219***
	(0.048)	(0.048)	(0.049)	(0.048)	(0.049)	(0.049)
Intercepts						
1 2	1.908***	1.874***	2.254***	1.530***	1.525***	1.879***
	(0.094)	(0.094)	(0.095)	(0.093)	(0.093)	(0.095)
2 3	2.985***	2.949***	3.393***	2.462***	2.457***	2.856***
	(0.093)	(0.093)	(0.095)	(0.092)	(0.092)	(0.094)
3 4	4.124***	4.087***	4.602***	3.489***	3.483***	3.932***

	(0.095)	(0.095)	(0.097)	(0.093)	(0.093)	(0.095)
4 5	5.686***	5.648***	6.250***	4.929***	4.923***	5.442***
	(0.100)	(0.100)	(0.103)	(0.097)	(0.097)	(0.100)
5 6	7.208***	7.173***	7.852***	6.356***	6.351***	6.937***
	(0.106)	(0.106)	(0.110)	(0.102)	(0.102)	(0.105)
6 7	9.020***	8.995***	9.745***	8.123***	8.118***	8.772***
	(0.114)	(0.114)	(0.119)	(0.110)	(0.110)	(0.113)
Log Likelihood	-21,992.2	-21,975.3	-21,330.5	-22,707.9	-22,705.4	-22,133.4
Num. obs.	14,831	14,830	14,822	14,839	14,837	14,828

Table A2. Proportional odds logistic regression models predicting trust in ECs including interactions of trust in EU with satisfaction with democracy and rule of law.

	Trust in ECs			
	CJEU		ECtHR	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Trust in EU	1.028***	1.049***	0.854***	0.884***
	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.027)	(0.027)
Trust in National Government	-0.174***	-0.181***	-0.110***	-0.117***
	(0.013)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Trust in National Judiciary	0.453***	0.455***	0.420***	0.421***
	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.013)
Satisfaction with Democracy	0.036		0.046	
	(0.035)		(0.035)	
Satisfaction with Rule of Law		0.085*		0.110**
		(0.035)		(0.035)
Trust in EU x ...				
... Satisfaction with Democracy	-0.024**		-0.026***	
	(0.008)		(0.008)	
... Satisfaction with Rule of Law		-0.031***		-0.037***
		(0.008)		(0.008)
Trust in People	0.072***	0.071***	0.072***	0.071***
	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.011)
National Identification	-0.052***	-0.053***	-0.029***	-0.030***
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)
Regional Identification	0.045***	0.045***	0.036***	0.037***
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)
European Identification	0.122***	0.121***	0.099***	0.099***
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)
Male (Ref. = Female)	-0.074*	-0.072*	-0.104***	-0.103***
	(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.031)
Age	0.005***	0.005***	0.006***	0.006***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Interest in Politics	0.119***	0.120***	0.187***	0.188***
	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.019)

Religiosity	-0.031***	-0.031***	-0.032***	-0.032***
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Income	0.003	0.002	-0.008	-0.009
	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Country (Ref. = Denmark)				
France	0.122*	0.136**	-0.040	-0.023
	(0.051)	(0.051)	(0.051)	(0.051)
Poland	0.200***	0.190***	0.155**	0.142**
	(0.054)	(0.055)	(0.054)	(0.054)
Spain	-0.072	-0.059	-0.128*	-0.116*
	(0.052)	(0.052)	(0.052)	(0.052)
UK	-0.035	-0.019	-0.249***	-0.234***
	(0.049)	(0.049)	(0.049)	(0.049)
Intercepts				
1 2	2.417***	2.532***	2.072***	2.220***
	(0.129)	(0.128)	(0.128)	(0.127)
2 3	3.563***	3.681***	3.056***	3.207***
	(0.130)	(0.129)	(0.129)	(0.128)
3 4	4.778***	4.897***	4.137***	4.291***
	(0.133)	(0.132)	(0.131)	(0.131)
4 5	6.428***	6.548***	5.650***	5.806***
	(0.137)	(0.137)	(0.135)	(0.134)
5 6	8.027***	8.145***	7.143***	7.297***
	(0.142)	(0.141)	(0.138)	(0.138)
6 7	9.916***	10.030***	8.973***	9.123***
	(0.148)	(0.147)	(0.143)	(0.143)
AIC	42680.735	42677.814	44285.024	44277.904
BIC	42863.221	42860.300	44467.520	44460.400
Log Likelihood	-21316.4	-21314.9	-22118.5	-22115.0
Deviance	42632.735	42629.814	44237.024	44229.904
Num. obs.	14,818	14,818	14,824	14,824

Table A3. Proportional odds logistic regression models predicting trust in ECs including interactions of trust in national government with satisfaction with democracy and rule of law.

	Trust in ECs			
	CJEU		ECtHR	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Trust in EU	0.957*** (0.015)	0.956*** (0.015)	0.775*** (0.014)	0.774*** (0.014)
Trust in National Government	-0.245*** (0.029)	-0.263*** (0.028)	-0.246*** (0.029)	-0.242*** (0.028)
Trust in National Judiciary	0.452*** (0.013)	0.454*** (0.013)	0.420*** (0.013)	0.421*** (0.013)
Satisfaction with Democracy	-0.118*** (0.031)		-0.179*** (0.030)	
Satisfaction with Rule of Law		-0.112*** (0.032)		-0.149*** (0.031)
Trust in National Government x ...				
... Satisfaction with Democracy	0.021** (0.008)		0.040*** (0.008)	
... Satisfaction with Rule of Law		0.025** (0.008)		0.038*** (0.008)
Trust in People	0.070*** (0.011)	0.069*** (0.011)	0.070*** (0.011)	0.069*** (0.011)
National Identification	-0.052*** (0.007)	-0.052*** (0.007)	-0.029*** (0.007)	-0.030*** (0.007)
Regional Identification	0.044*** (0.007)	0.044*** (0.007)	0.035*** (0.007)	0.035*** (0.007)
European Identification	0.123*** (0.007)	0.122*** (0.007)	0.101*** (0.007)	0.101*** (0.007)
Male (Ref. = Female)	-0.078* (0.031)	-0.077* (0.031)	-0.112*** (0.031)	-0.110*** (0.031)
Age	0.005*** (0.001)	0.005*** (0.001)	0.006*** (0.001)	0.006*** (0.001)
Interest in Politics	0.115*** (0.019)	0.116*** (0.019)	0.178*** (0.019)	0.181*** (0.019)
Religiosity	-0.032*** (0.005)	-0.032*** (0.005)	-0.033*** (0.005)	-0.033*** (0.005)
Income	0.002 (0.006)	0.001 (0.006)	-0.009 (0.006)	-0.010 (0.006)
Country (Ref. = Denmark)				
France	0.116* (0.051)	0.125* (0.051)	-0.042 (0.051)	-0.035 (0.051)
Poland	0.221*** (0.054)	0.217*** (0.054)	0.177*** (0.054)	0.170** (0.054)
Spain	-0.064 (0.052)	-0.054 (0.052)	-0.111* (0.052)	-0.106* (0.052)
UK	-0.010 (0.049)	0.006 (0.049)	-0.210*** (0.049)	-0.198*** (0.049)
Intercepts				
1 2	1.971*** (0.126)	1.969*** (0.126)	1.404*** (0.125)	1.466*** (0.126)

2 3	3.104***	3.101***	2.373***	2.435***
	(0.127)	(0.128)	(0.125)	(0.126)
3 4	4.310***	4.304***	3.442***	3.503***
	(0.129)	(0.130)	(0.127)	(0.128)
4 5	5.957***	5.950***	4.949***	5.010***
	(0.134)	(0.135)	(0.131)	(0.132)
5 6	7.563***	7.558***	6.450***	6.511***
	(0.138)	(0.139)	(0.134)	(0.135)
6 7	9.465***	9.460***	8.301***	8.360***
	(0.144)	(0.145)	(0.139)	(0.140)
AIC	42682.867	42683.435	44270.094	44276.678
BIC	42865.353	42865.921	44452.590	44459.174
Log Likelihood	-21317.4	-21317.7	-22111.0	-22114.3
Deviance	42634.867	42635.435	44222.094	44228.678
Num. obs.	14,818	14,818	14,824	14,824

Table A4. Proportional odds logistic regression models predicting trust in ECs including interactions of trust in national judiciary with satisfaction with democracy and rule of law.

	Trust in ECs			
	CJEU		ECtHR	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Trust in EU	0.954***	0.953***	0.774***	0.773***
	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.014)	(0.014)
Trust in National Government	-0.178***	-0.186***	-0.114***	-0.124***
	(0.013)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Trust in National Judiciary	0.329***	0.270***	0.339***	0.276***
	(0.027)	(0.027)	(0.027)	(0.027)
Satisfaction with Democracy	-0.198***		-0.147***	
	(0.034)		(0.033)	
Satisfaction with Rule of Law		-0.250***		-0.199***
		(0.034)		(0.034)
Trust in National Judiciary x ...				
... Satisfaction with Democracy	0.040***		0.026***	
	(0.008)		(0.008)	
... Satisfaction with Rule of Law		0.061***		0.048***
		(0.008)		(0.008)
Trust in People	0.069***	0.067***	0.070***	0.067***
	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.011)
National Identification	-0.051***	-0.051***	-0.028***	-0.029***
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)
Regional Identification	0.043***	0.042***	0.035***	0.034***
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)
European Identification	0.124***	0.124***	0.101***	0.101***
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)
Male (Ref. = Female)	-0.077*	-0.079*	-0.106***	-0.108***
	(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.031)
Age	0.005***	0.006***	0.006***	0.006***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)

Interest in Politics	0.117***	0.116***	0.187***	0.186***
	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.019)
Religiosity	-0.032***	-0.032***	-0.033***	-0.033***
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Income	0.002	0.001	-0.009	-0.010
	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Country (Ref. = Denmark)				
France	0.133**	0.167**	-0.037	-0.004
	(0.051)	(0.051)	(0.051)	(0.051)
Poland	0.273***	0.312***	0.214***	0.252***
	(0.055)	(0.055)	(0.055)	(0.055)
Spain	-0.050	-0.018	-0.113*	-0.083
	(0.052)	(0.052)	(0.052)	(0.052)
UK	0.013	0.039	-0.211***	-0.182***
	(0.049)	(0.049)	(0.049)	(0.049)
Intercepts				
1 2	1.772***	1.629***	1.539***	1.383***
	(0.126)	(0.124)	(0.125)	(0.123)
2 3	2.901***	2.755***	2.510***	2.350***
	(0.127)	(0.125)	(0.126)	(0.124)
3 4	4.106***	3.956***	3.582***	3.418***
	(0.129)	(0.127)	(0.127)	(0.125)
4 5	5.754***	5.605***	5.091***	4.928***
	(0.133)	(0.131)	(0.131)	(0.129)
5 6	7.365***	7.222***	6.591***	6.432***
	(0.137)	(0.135)	(0.134)	(0.132)
6 7	9.272***	9.136***	8.435***	8.283***
	(0.143)	(0.141)	(0.139)	(0.137)
AIC	42663.106	42633.284	44285.102	44262.145
BIC	42845.592	42815.770	44467.598	44444.641
Log Likelihood	-21307.6	-21292.6	-22118.6	-22107.1
Deviance	42615.106	42585.284	44237.102	44214.145
Num. obs.	14,818	14,818	14,824	14,824

Appendix Figures

Figure A1. Effect of trust in EU, national government and national judiciary by country.

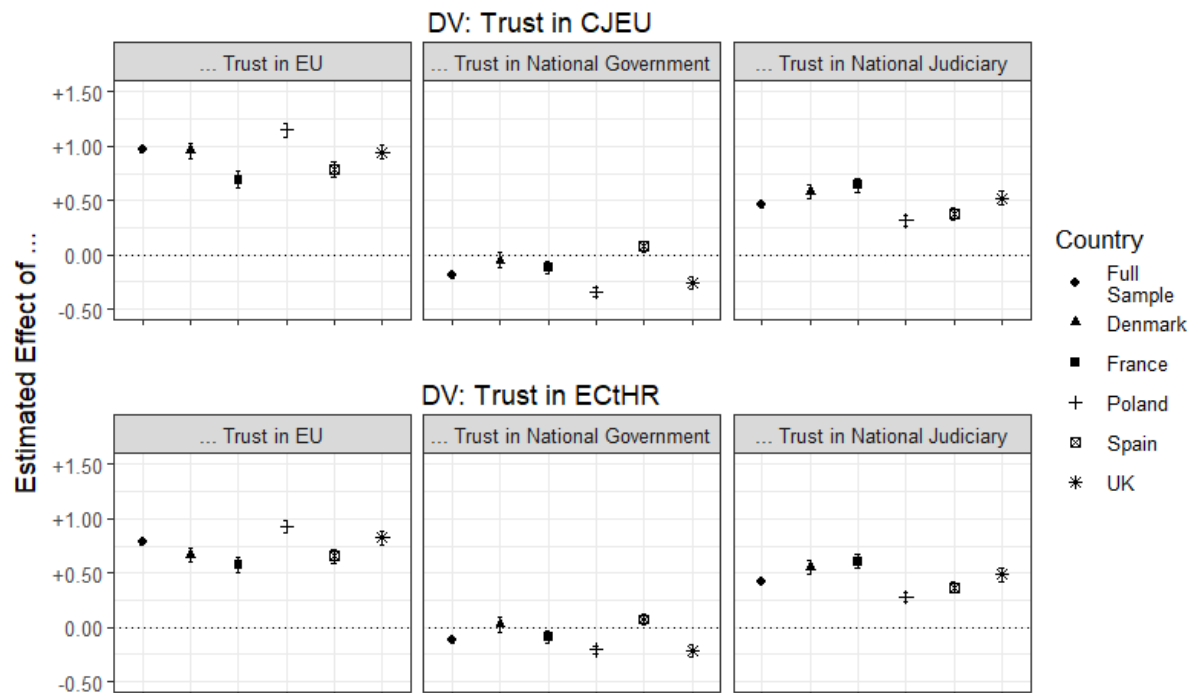


Figure A2. The effect of trust in the EU interacted with satisfaction with democracy and rule of law by country.

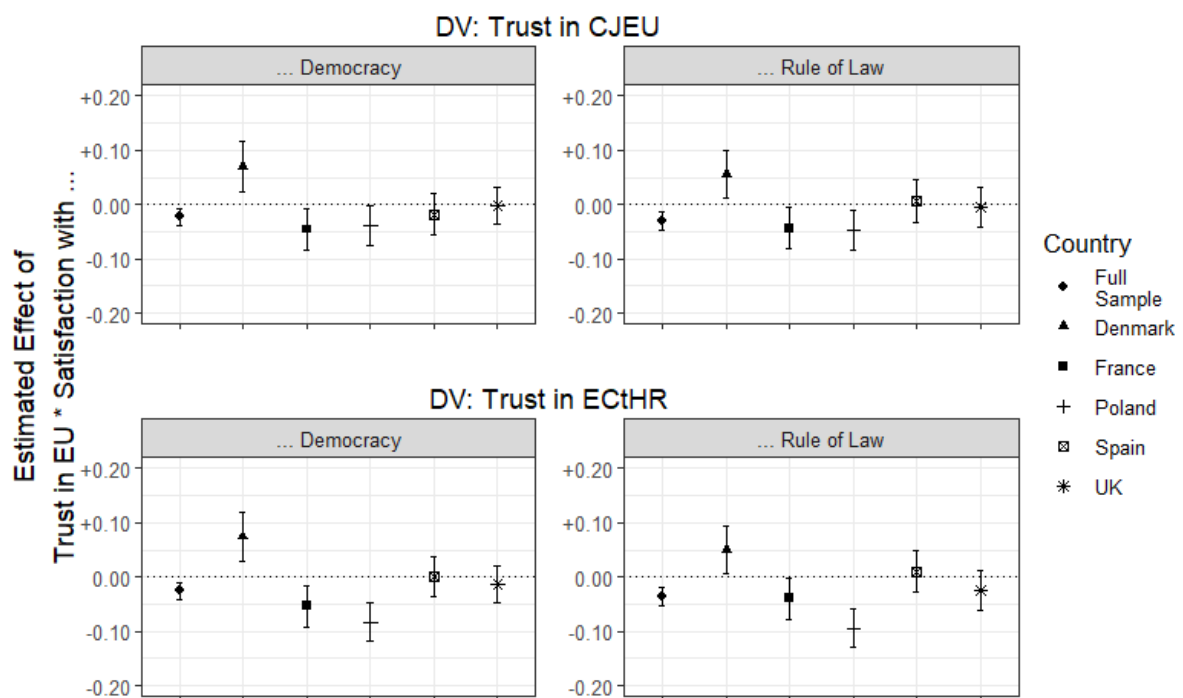


Figure A3. The effect of trust in the national government interacted with satisfaction with democracy and rule of law by country.

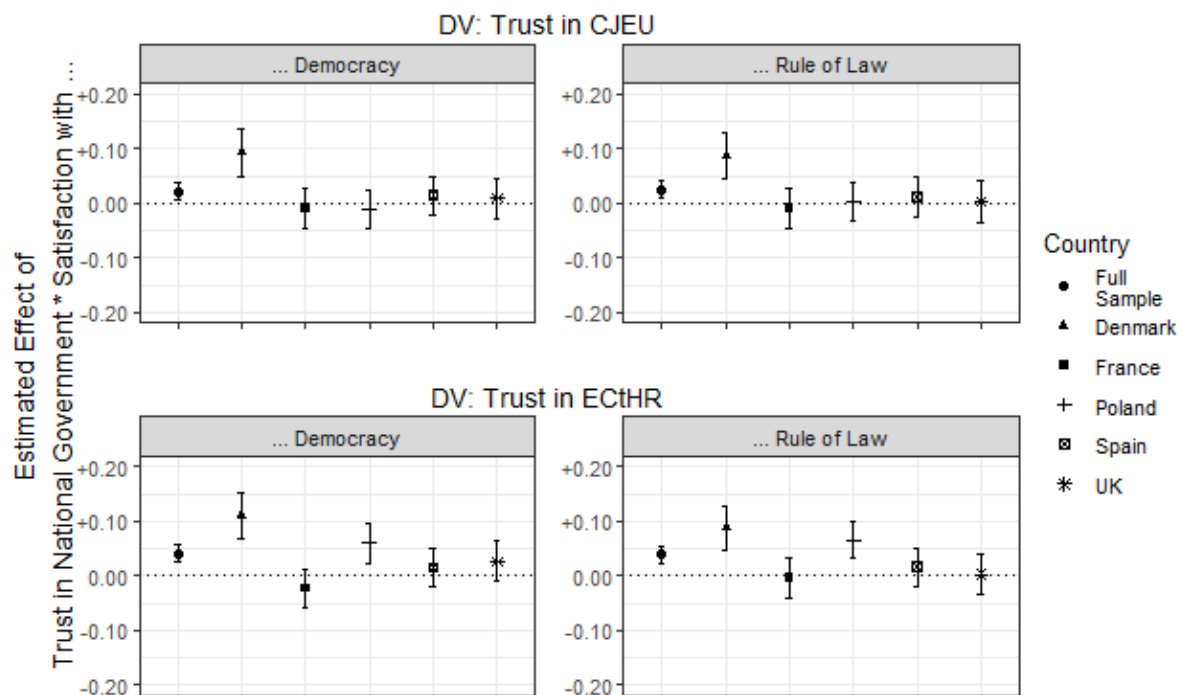


Figure A4. The effect of trust in the national judiciary interacted with satisfaction with democracy and rule of law by country.

