

Responsive or Responsible? The Reputational Cost of Political Compromises*

MARIKEN A.C.G. VAN DER VELDEN, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

MAURITS MEIJERS, Radboud University Nijmegen

With electoral fragmentation on the rise political compromises are more than ever daily necessities. Yet, while the abstract democratic principle of political compromise finds broad support, voters have been shown to reject compromise when confronted with specific compromises between political parties. Compromises obscure a party's policy reputation, which can negatively affect electoral support. During coalition negotiations political parties therefore face a trade-off between responsiveness to their voters and responsibility in government formation. This begs the question: Do compromises confront parties with reputational costs? Using a pre-registered observational study of 6 Western European countries as a proof of concept, we show that being less willing to accept compromise coincides with lower levels of trust in political parties. To examine more closely whether responsive or responsible party behaviour in coalition negotiations is decisive for voters' party trust, we further conduct a pre-registered survey experiment in Germany fielded just after the 2021 parliamentary elections ($N=8,000$). This allows us to 1) isolate the effect of parties' negotiation position from success or failure in the negotiations; and 2) delve into the mechanisms that drive voters' party trust after (not) accepting compromises. Our study sheds light on the reputational costs associated with accepting compromises in coalition negotiations. Thereby, our study has important implications for the study of political representation.

Keywords: Experiment, Populist Attitudes

Introduction

- Urgency: Democratic commitment of citizens is crucial for the resilience of representative democracy
- Fragmentation increases the need for political compromises
- Yet, what are the reputational costs of political compromise (and what are the effects on)
- Compromise / pol pluralism accepted in the abstract / in principle.

We advance a behavioural theory of political pluralism in which we posit that while compromise (and other aspects of pol pluralism) are accepted in principle, citizens oppose compromises in practice. Hence, we theorize there are significant reputational costs involved when parties accept political compromise. This approach helps us to explain present day discontent with politics and the rise of anti-establishment parties (cf. democratic commitment).

Acceptance of Political Compromises

Responsive vs responsible parties - Position change and reputations - Coalitions and reputations - Compromise attitudes (principledness, social trust, populist attitudes, views on representation)

Observational Study

Theory & Hypothesis

Hypothesis: *The lower one's willingness to accept compromises, the lower one's trust in politicians.*

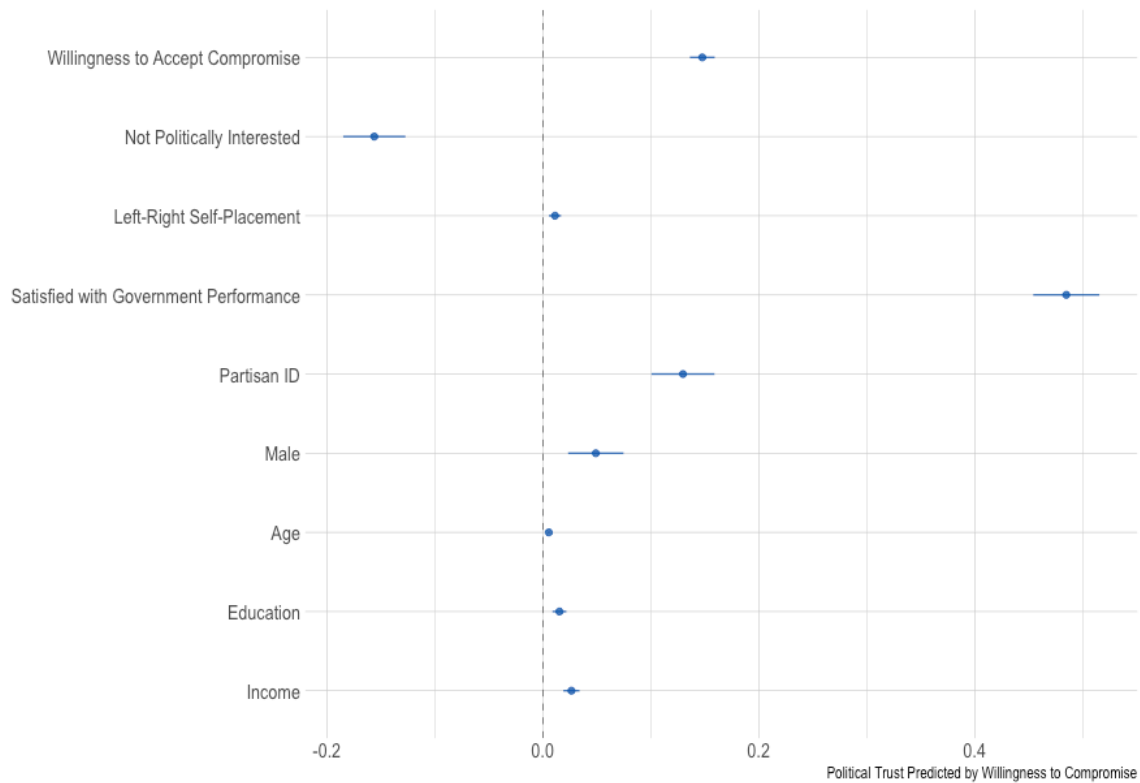
*Replication files are available on the author's Github account (<https://github.com/MarikenvdVelden/willingness-to-accept-compromises>). **Current version:** April 05, 2022; **Corresponding author:**

Results

OLS regression predicting the level of political trust by willingness to accept compromises. Next to the control variables, it includes country dummies and dummies indicating whether more than ten percent of the values were missing. The beta-coefficient of Willingness to Accept Compromise is positive and statistically significant, as hypothesized in our Pre-Analysis Plan. The coefficient of 0.15 is however a small effect. It indicates that the higher one's willingness to accept compromise, the higher one's trust in politicians. More precisely, it means that when Willingness to Accept Compromise goes up by 1 – i.e. answering rather *yes* instead of *completely agree* with the statement *What people call compromise in politics is really just selling out on one's principles*. – the level of trust in politicians goes up by 0.15. Trust in politicians is a five-point scale, where 1 indicates completely disagreeing with the statement *Most politicians are trustworthy* and 5 indicates that one completely agrees with the statement.

Because we pooled the data of various countries, Appendix A demonstrates the country differences. The Netherlands is the reference category. This graph demonstrates that all countries, but particularly France, Germany, Great Britain, and Italy, are statistically different from the Netherlands. To make sure the effect is not driven by any particular country, the graphs below show that for all countries, the coefficient is positive. Moreover, except for Italy, the coefficient is statistically significant too. This indicates that the effects found in the pooled analysis are not driven by any specific country.

Figure .1: Results: H1



Moreover, we have imputed the missing values using the *Green & Gerber formula* (Green & Gerber 2008).

To demonstrate whether the dichotomous variables indicating whether the respondents' value was missing are different from the respondents' who have completed the question, the graph below demonstrates the coefficients of the missing dummies. The graph shows that only for the variables `age` and `trust` the imputed values elicit a different effect from the non-imputed ones. The result show that particularly the imputed missing values for `trust` and `age` seem to elicit an effect in the regression results. To check the robustness of the analysis, we therefore have also ran the analysis excluding the observations where `trust` and `age` have been imputed. As the visualization below demonstrates, this does not change the coefficient of `willingness to accept compromise`.

Experimental Study

Limitations to Observational Study

Theory & Hypothesis

H1 (Steadfast): *All else equal, in-partisans view their party more positively when a party remains steadfast in coalition talks, compared to accepting a compromise.*

H2 (Outcome): *All else equal, in-partisans view their party more positively when coalition talks continue compared to stalling of the coalition talks.*

H3 (Compromise): *All else equal, in-partisans view their party that accepts a compromise more positively when coalition talks continue compared to stalling of the coalition talks.*

H4 (Principledness): *All else equal, the more principled a respondent is, the higher the evaluation of a steadfast party.*

H5 (Mutual Distrust): *All else equal, the more distrusting a respondent is, the higher the evaluation of a steadfast party.*

Data, Measurement & Method

Data

The survey experiment is conducted in Germany between the 13th of October 2021 and the 11th of November 2021. The sample, recruited through Respondi, consists of 8,000 participants (based on the power analysis presented in Figure ??) of 18 years and older. Respondi works with opt-in respondents, so we have implemented quota on age, gender, and education. Moreover, we measure some more demographic background variables (see Section 3.2). Balance checks are conducted to demonstrate whether certain categories are over represented in a certain experimental group (see Section 3.2.3, Figure .2). The study has been approved by the Research Ethics Review Committee of the *Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam* (see the approval [here](#)). To ensure good quality of our data, two attention checks are included. Each respondent failing the attention check will be excluded and replaced with another "good" response.

Measurement

Dependent Variables

Experimental Conditions

Covariates

Method

Results

Figure .2: Balance Checks

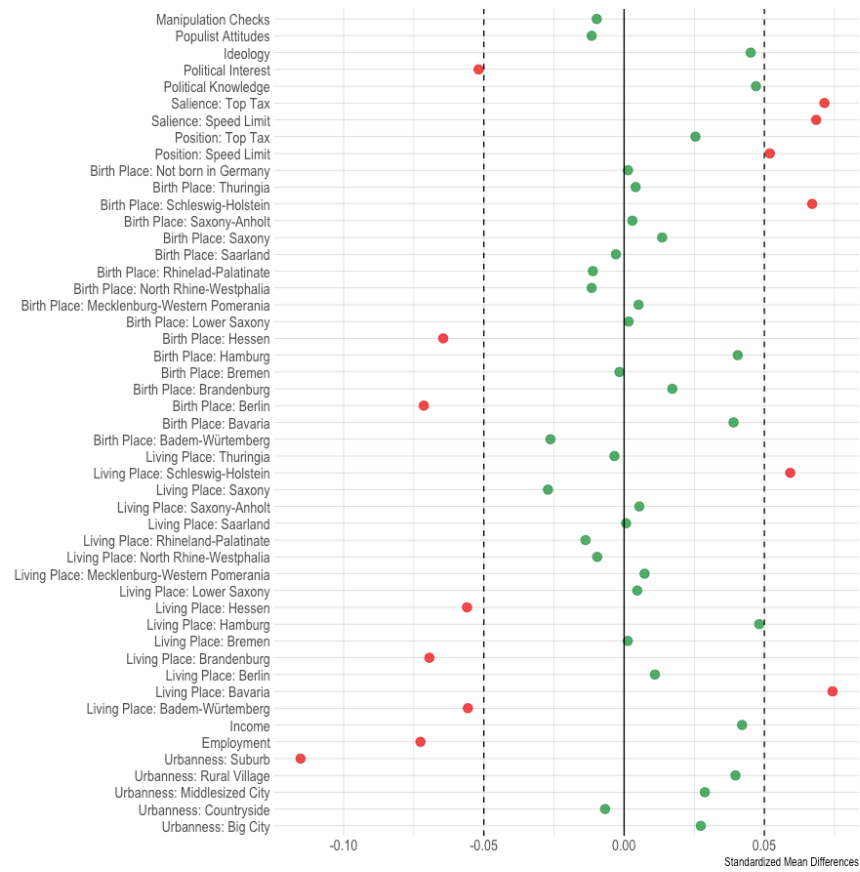


Figure .3: Results: H1 and H2

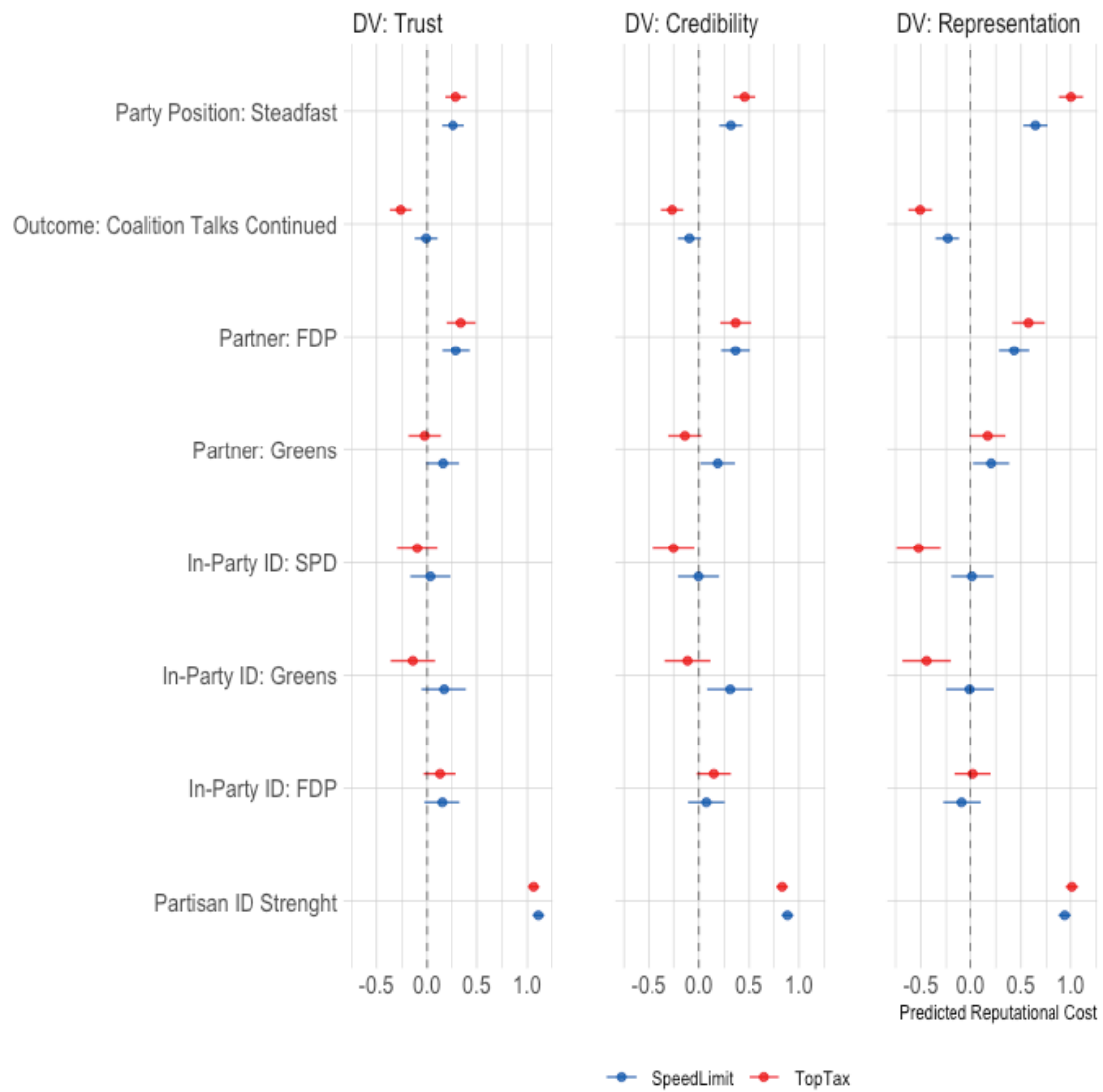


Figure .4: Results: H3

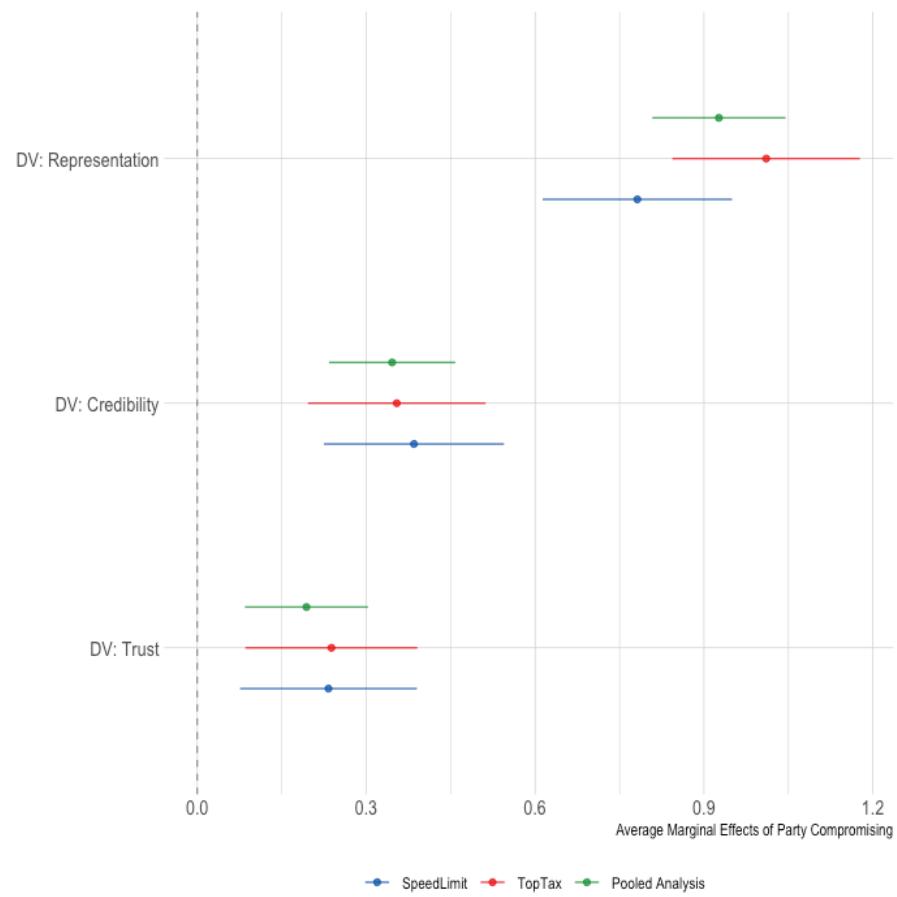


Figure .5: Results: H4 pooled

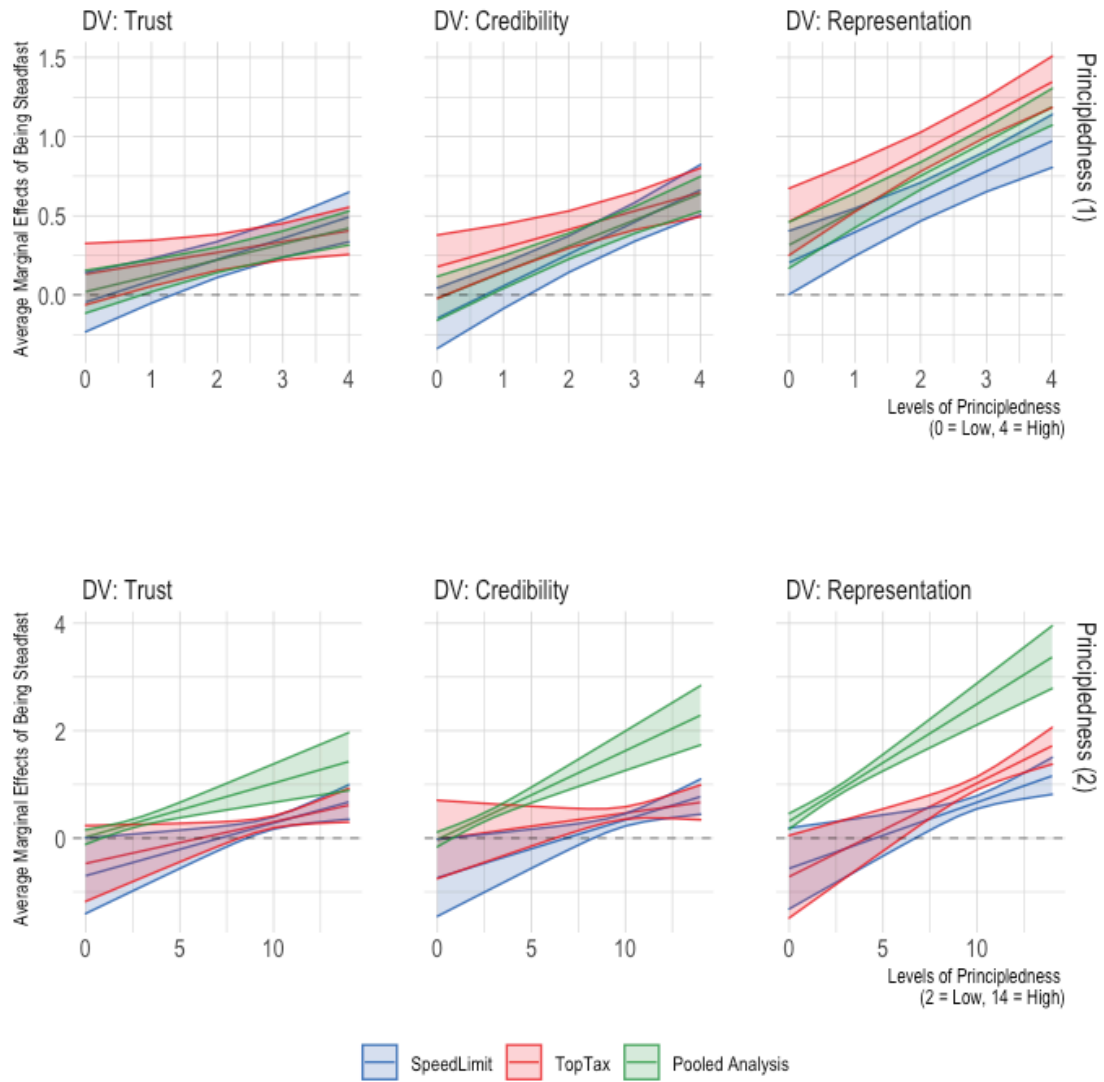


Figure .6: Results: H5 pooled

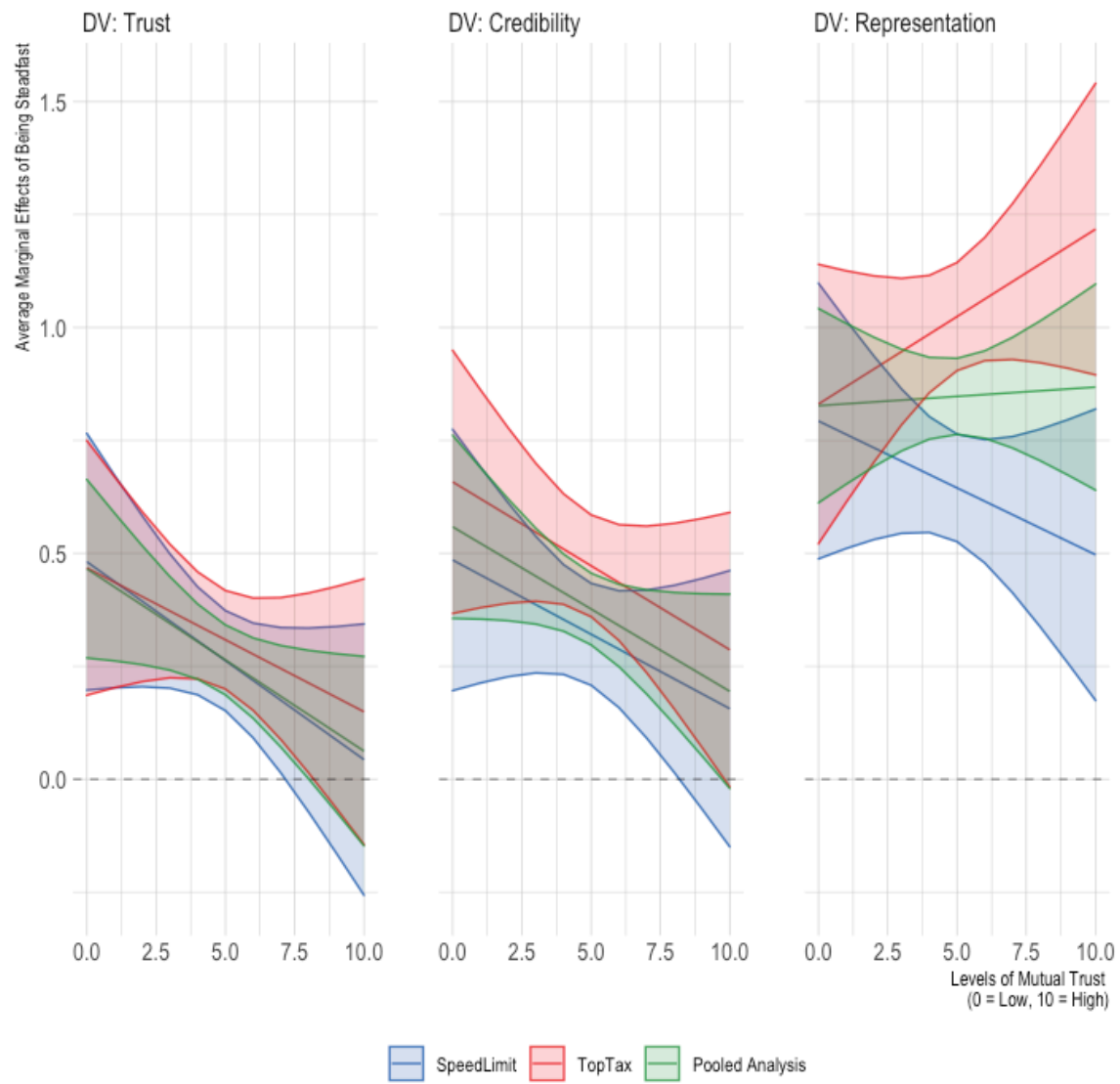


Table .1: Descriptive Information

Variables	Mean Value	St. Dev	Min. Value	Max. Value
Treatment: Party Compromised	0.56	0.50	0	1
Employment	4.22	3.89	0	11
Income	6.34	3.07	0	13
DV: Trust	5.38	2.41	0	10
DV: Credibility	5.30	2.37	0	10
DV: Representation	5.16	2.56	0	10
Principledness (1)	9.81	1.53	2	14
Principledness (2)	2.40	1.66	0	4
Mutual Trust	4.87	2.01	0	10
Manipulation Checks	1.43	0.67	0	2
Treatment: Coalition Talks	0.51	0.50	0	1
Continue				
Political Knowledge	2.18	1.07	0	4
Populist Attitudes	3.55	0.78	1	5
Position Speed Limit	0.54	0.50	0	1
Position Top Tax	0.57	0.50	0	1
Position Legalization Cannabis	0.54	0.50	0	1
Salience Speed Limit	4.25	3.53	0	11
Salience Top Tax	4.75	3.53	0	11
Salience Legalization Cannabis	3.95	3.43	0	11
Political Interest	2.92	1.05	1	5
Ideology	4.77	1.75	0	10
Partisan Strength	3.08	0.99	1	5

Discussion

References

Appendix A. Robustness Analyses Observational Study

Figure .7: Results

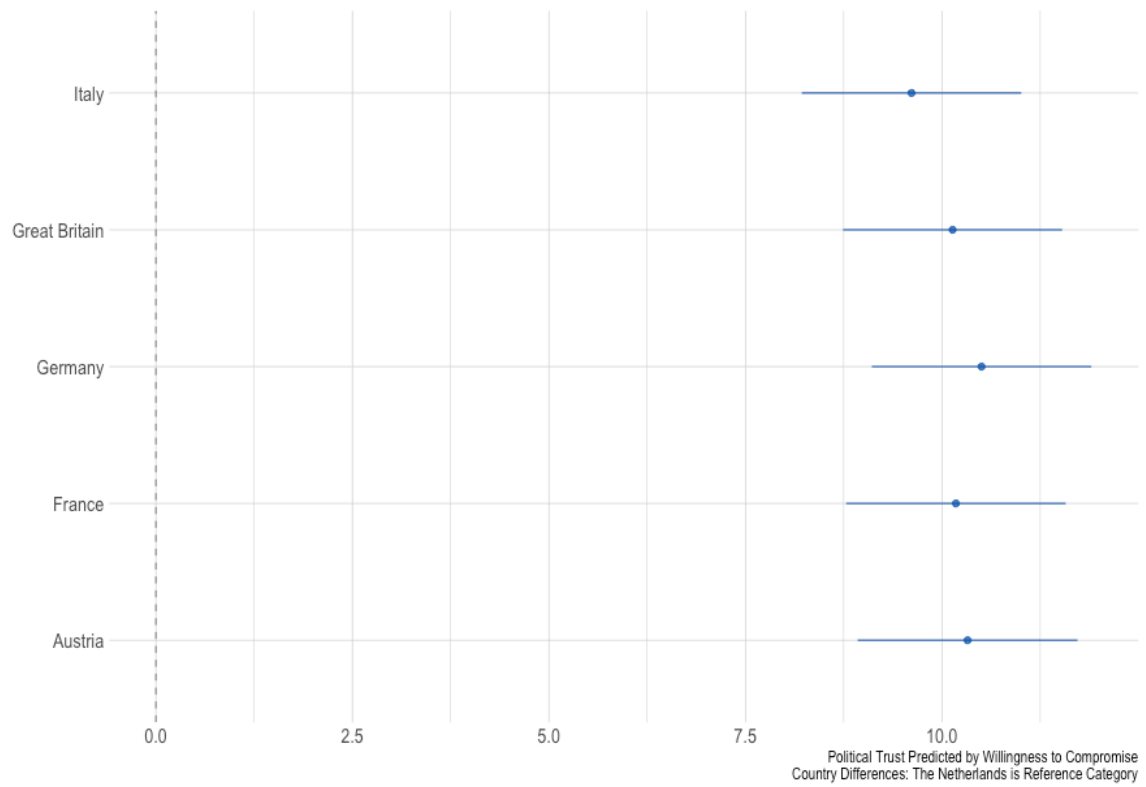


Figure .8: Results

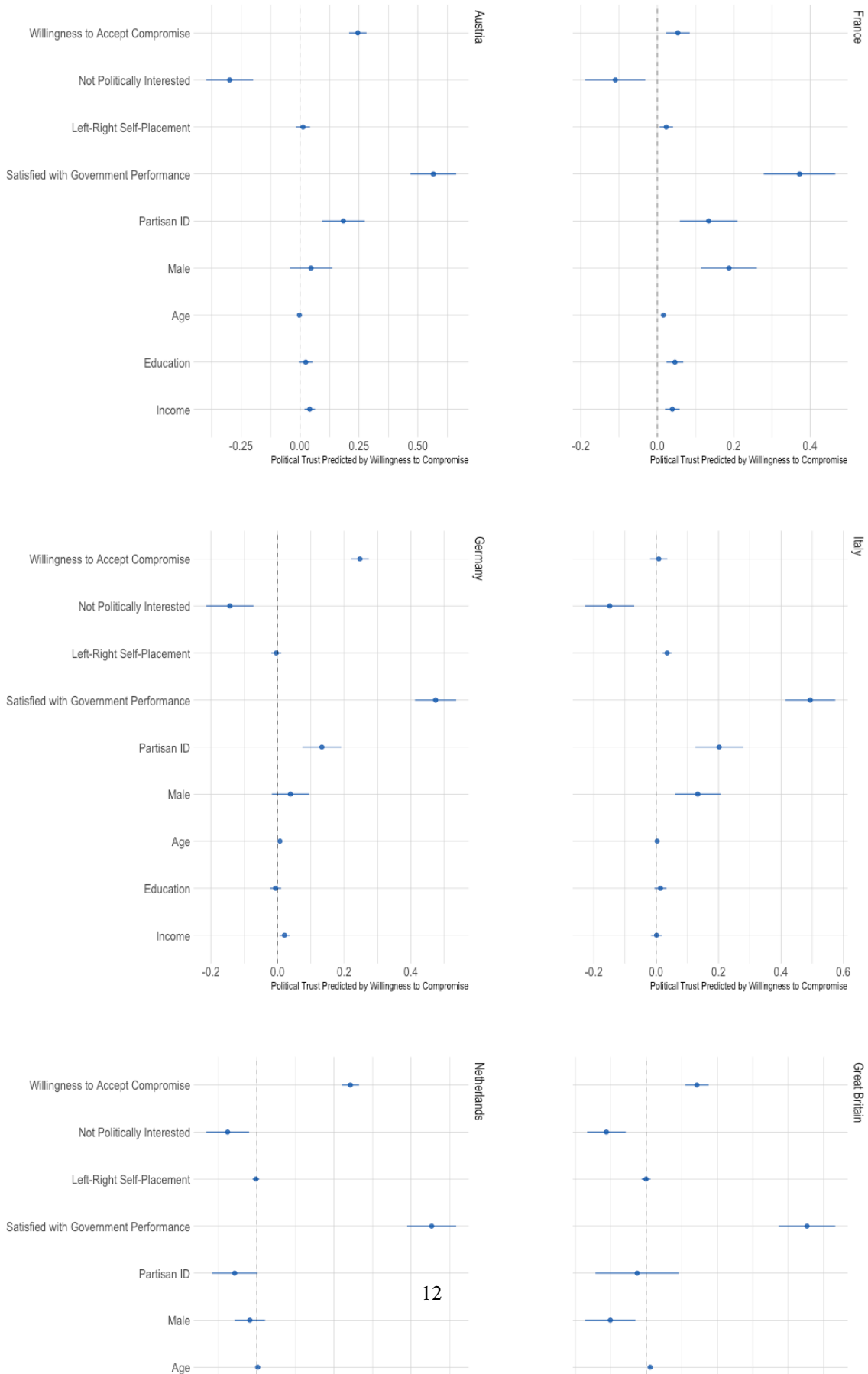


Figure .9: Results

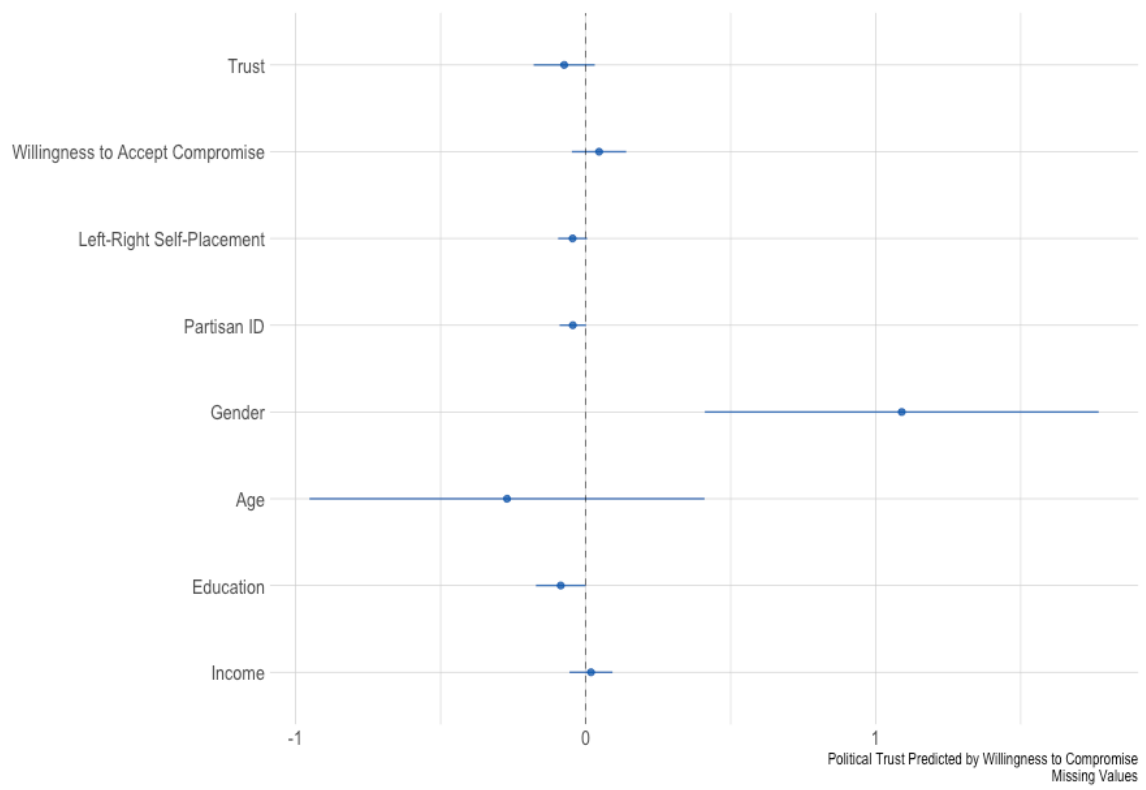
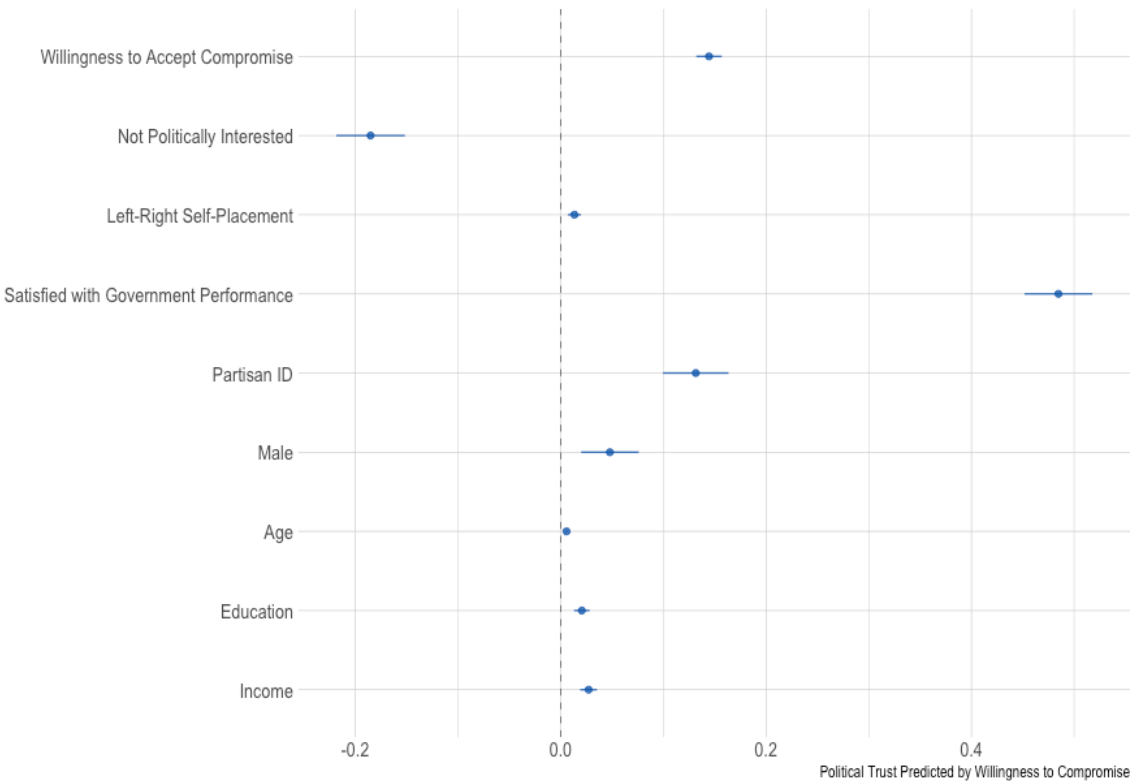


Figure .10: Results



Appendix B. Experimental Conditions

Table .2: Experimental Conditions (1)

	In-Party	Partner	Compromise	Outcome	Issue
1	CDU	SPD	Yes	Stalled	TopTax
2	CDU	SPD	Yes	Negotiation	TopTax
3	CDU	SPD	No	Stalled	TopTax
4	CDU	SPD	No	Negotiation	TopTax
5	CDU	SPD	Yes	Stalled	SpeedLimit
6	CDU	SPD	Yes	Negotiation	SpeedLimit
7	CDU	SPD	No	Stalled	SpeedLimit
8	CDU	SPD	No	Negotiation	SpeedLimit
9	CDU	die Grünen	Yes	Stalled	TopTax
10	CDU	die Grünen	Yes	Negotiation	TopTax
11	CDU	die Grünen	No	Stalled	TopTax
12	CDU	die Grünen	No	Negotiation	TopTax
13	CDU	die Grünen	Yes	Stalled	SpeedLimit
14	CDU	die Grünen	Yes	Negotiation	SpeedLimit
15	CDU	die Grünen	No	Stalled	SpeedLimit
16	CDU	die Grünen	No	Negotiation	SpeedLimit
17	FDP	SPD	Yes	Stalled	TopTax
18	FDP	SPD	Yes	Negotiation	TopTax
19	FDP	SPD	No	Stalled	TopTax
20	FDP	SPD	No	Negotiation	TopTax
21	FDP	SPD	Yes	Stalled	SpeedLimit
22	FDP	SPD	Yes	Negotiation	SpeedLimit
23	FDP	SPD	No	Stalled	SpeedLimit
24	FDP	SPD	No	Negotiation	SpeedLimit
25	FDP	die Grünen	Yes	Stalled	TopTax
26	FDP	die Grünen	Yes	Negotiation	TopTax
27	FDP	die Grünen	No	Stalled	TopTax
28	FDP	die Grünen	No	Negotiation	TopTax
29	FDP	die Grünen	Yes	Stalled	SpeedLimit
30	FDP	die Grünen	Yes	Negotiation	SpeedLimit
31	FDP	die Grünen	No	Stalled	SpeedLimit
32	FDP	die Grünen	No	Negotiation	SpeedLimit

Table .3: Experimental Conditions (2)

	In-Party	Partner	Compromise	Outcome	Issue
33	SPD	CDU	Yes	Stalled	TopTax
34	SPD	CDU	Yes	Negotiation	TopTax
35	SPD	CDU	No	Stalled	TopTax
36	SPD	CDU	No	Negotiation	TopTax
37	SPD	CDU	Yes	Stalled	SpeedLimit
38	SPD	CDU	Yes	Negotiation	SpeedLimit
39	SPD	CDU	No	Stalled	SpeedLimit
40	SPD	CDU	No	Negotiation	SpeedLimit
41	SPD	FDP	Yes	Stalled	TopTax
42	SPD	FDP	Yes	Negotiation	TopTax
43	SPD	FDP	No	Stalled	TopTax
44	SPD	FDP	No	Negotiation	TopTax
45	SPD	FDP	Yes	Stalled	SpeedLimit
46	SPD	FDP	Yes	Negotiation	SpeedLimit
47	SPD	FDP	No	Stalled	SpeedLimit
48	SPD	FDP	No	Negotiation	SpeedLimit
49	die Grünen	CDU	Yes	Stalled	TopTax
50	die Grünen	CDU	Yes	Negotiation	TopTax
51	die Grünen	CDU	No	Stalled	TopTax
52	die Grünen	CDU	No	Negotiation	TopTax
53	die Grünen	CDU	Yes	Stalled	SpeedLimit
54	die Grünen	CDU	Yes	Negotiation	SpeedLimit
55	die Grünen	CDU	No	Stalled	SpeedLimit
56	die Grünen	CDU	No	Negotiation	SpeedLimit
57	die Grünen	FDP	Yes	Stalled	TopTax
58	die Grünen	FDP	Yes	Negotiation	TopTax
59	die Grünen	FDP	No	Stalled	TopTax
60	die Grünen	FDP	No	Negotiation	TopTax
61	die Grünen	FDP	Yes	Stalled	SpeedLimit
62	die Grünen	FDP	Yes	Negotiation	SpeedLimit
63	die Grünen	FDP	No	Stalled	SpeedLimit
64	die Grünen	FDP	No	Negotiation	SpeedLimit

Appendix C. HTE for H2/3: are continued talks evaluated positively only when there is compromise

#Appendix C. Direct Effect of Principledness and Mutual Trust on Parties' Reputational Cost

Figure .11: Results: H4

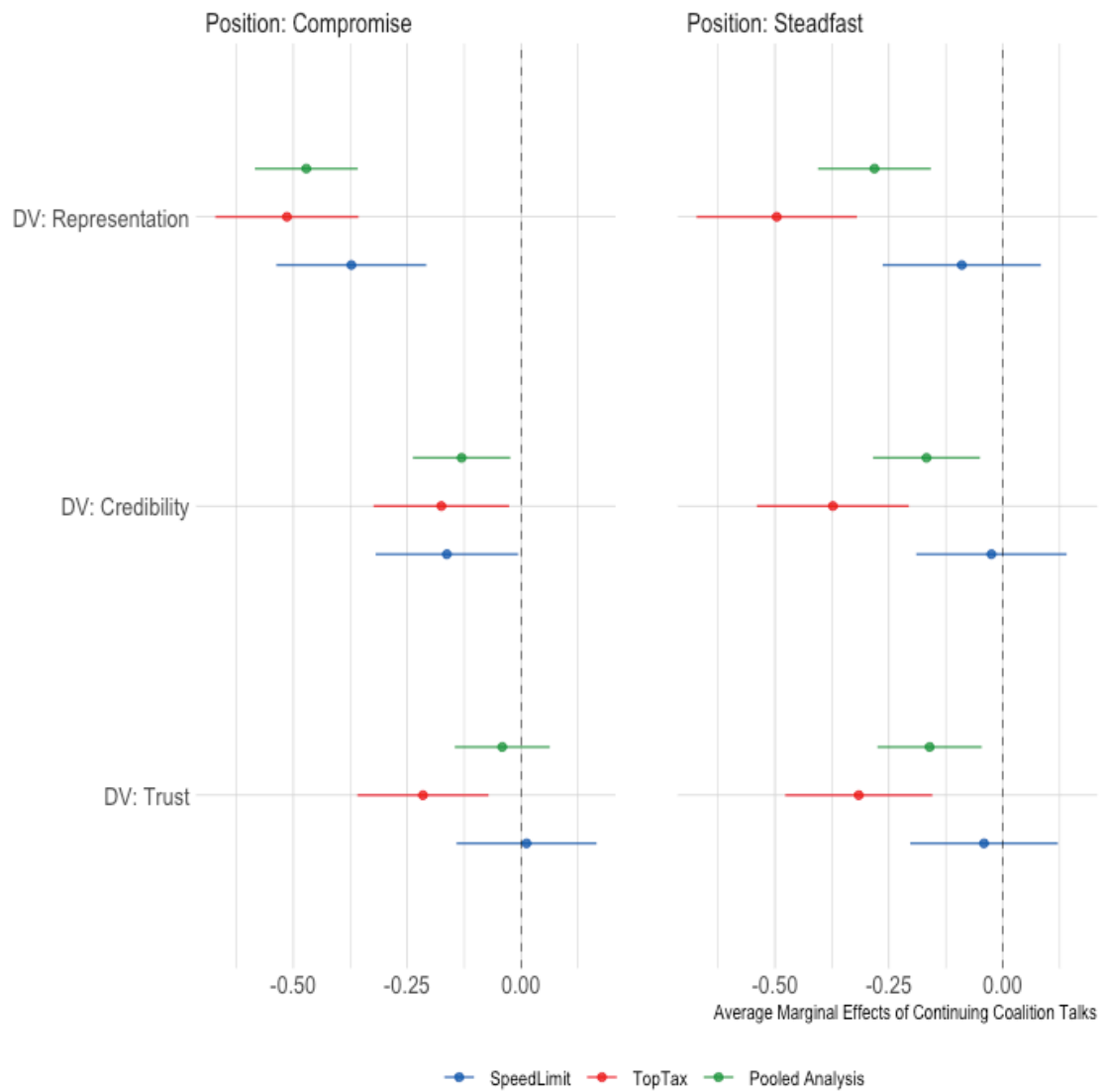


Figure .12: Results: Distribution of Principledness and Mutual Trust for Issues under Studies

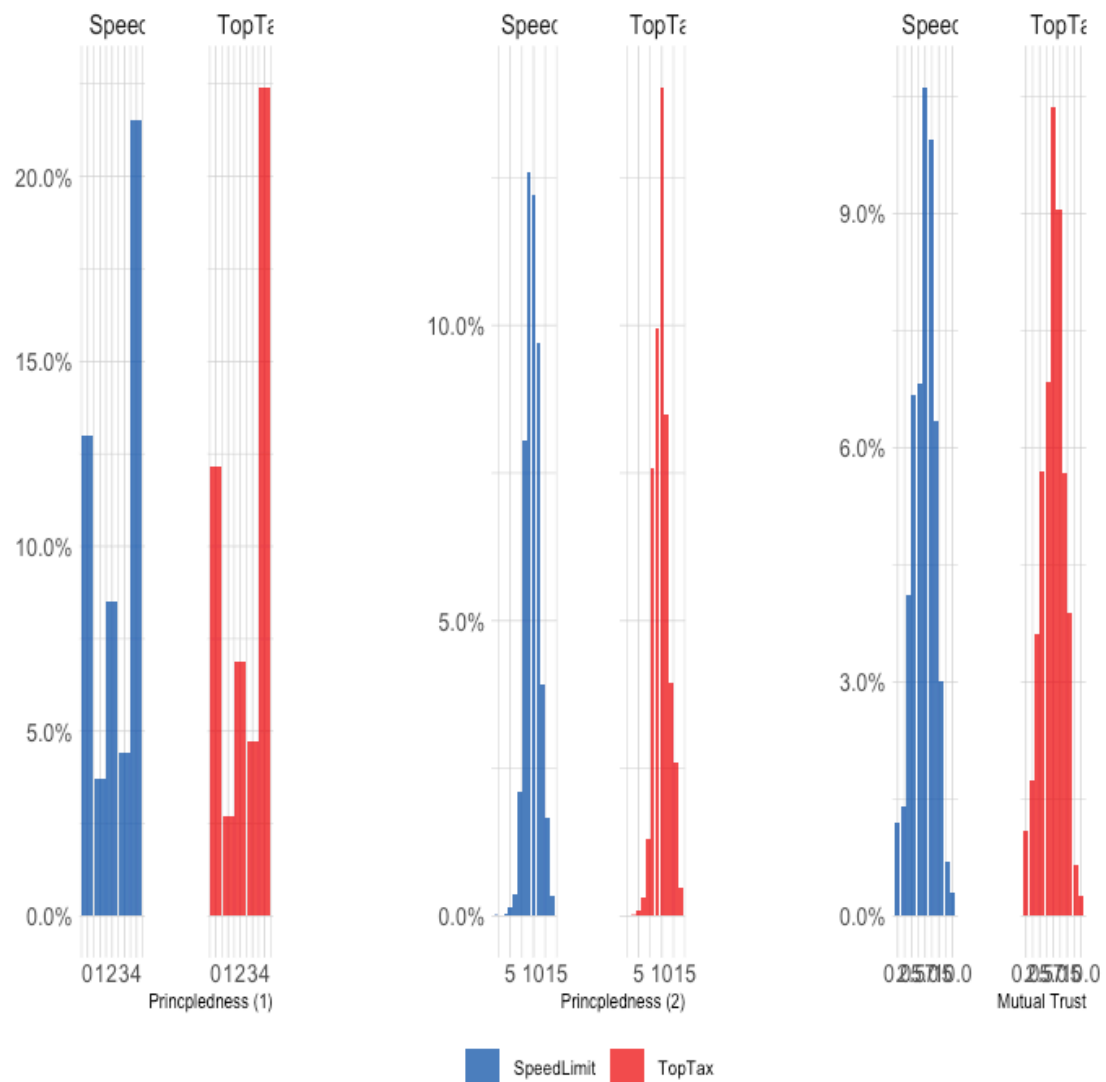


Figure .13: Results: Regression Effects of Principledness and Mutual Trust on Parties' Reputational Cost

