

The role of political trust on policy preferences and support remains debated in recent policy research. While examining redistribution policies, Devine (2024) finds negligible effects of political trust on policy preferences in the UK and Switzerland, contrasting with Macdonald (2021)'s evidence of trust shaping redistribution support in America. In environmental and climate change policy domains, Gomm et al. (2024) reveals that political trust enhances policy support and procedural inclusiveness mitigates the negative effects of low trust on policy support. Yet when examining trust specifically in administrative institutions, the evidence becomes even more nuanced—Harring (2018) found no effect of such trust on environmental policy support, while Bergquist et al. (2022) demonstrated that public trust in implementing institutions has a stronger effect on supporting climate change policies than other institutional trust.

These mixed findings underscore a critical challenge in understanding the causes and consequences of political trust: the lack of comparable, cross-national data on trust. For policy studies, trust in civil servants deserves particular attention because these officials directly interact with citizens, deliver public services, and translate policies into practice (Morelock, 2021). With adequate trust, the public more readily accepts services and complies with policy directives (Kim, 2005: 611). Conversely, low trust can impede officials' ability to implement policies effectively and secure public cooperation (Van Ryzin, 2011; Yates, 1982). Despite this importance, existing research on trust in civil servants remains geographically and temporally constrained (Choi, 2018; Houston et al., 2016; Morelock, 2021; Van de Walle and Migchelbrink, 2022), limiting our ability to understand how trust dynamics influence policy process across different governance contexts. In addition, the scarcity of comparable data makes it challenging to test competing theories about the factors influencing trust in bureaucracy, whether it is government performance, governance quality, or other factors (Bouckaert, 2012; Kettl, 2000; Morelock, 2021; Van de Walle and Migchelbrink, 2022).

To address this gap, we introduce the Trust in Civil Servants (TCS) dataset, which leverages 132 national and cross-national surveys covering 98 countries over 36 years (1986–2022) and applies recent advances in latent-variable modeling of public opinion (Solt, 2020c).

We validate the TCS data by demonstrating strong correlations with individual survey items and related measures, such as perceived corruption and trust in other political institutions.

Using the TCS data, we conduct a cross-national time-series analysis to examine competing theories on trust in civil servants, focusing on government outcomes versus government quality. We find that government outcomes, such as economic performance and public security, have short-term effects on trust, while government quality including effectiveness, exerts more significant, enduring effects. This underscores that while both factors are important, the quality of governance plays a long-term role in fostering trust in civil servants.

Our study contributes to comparative public administration and public policy by providing valid, comparable longitudinal data on trust in civil servants. Recent research underscores the need to explore how trust in public institutions influence complex policy challenges like climate change and environmental mitigation support, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, and decarbonization in comparative context (Cole et al., 2024; Davidovic, Forthcoming). The TCS dataset addresses these calls by enabling cross-national research on how trust interacts with governance quality and public sector performance, linking administrative practices to governance challenges and policy outcomes. Moreover, the TCS dataset contributes to ongoing policy debates on the role of institutional trust in shaping policy preferences. By facilitating comparative analyses, the TCS dataset allows researchers to explore whether and how trust influences support for complex policies across diverse contexts.

### **Debates on the Causes of Trust in Bureaucracy**

A longstanding puzzle in public administration is understanding what explains trust in bureaucracy. One dominant theme is the belief that higher levels of government performance lead to greater trust in civil servants, based on the assumption that better performance correlates with higher trust and that lower trust toward bureaucrats reflects dissatisfaction with government performance (Yang and Holzer, 2006). A common approach to measuring performance is through macroeconomic outcomes, such as economic growth, unemployment rate, economic inequality, and inflation. However, the results from studies on macroeco-

nomic outcomes are mixed. For example, Choi (2018) found that GDP per capita positively affects trust in bureaucracies, while Houston et al. (2016) did not find significant effects of GDP per capita and inflation rate on trust in civil servants. Instead, Houston et al. (2016) found that the unemployment rate negatively influences trust in civil servants. Contrary to previous studies that found some evidence for the role of government outcomes, Morelock (2021) found that none of the outcome indicators, including GDP per capita, inflation rate, unemployment, and the Gini index, had a significant effect on trust in civil servants.

Amidst these mixed results regarding macroeconomic outcomes, a growing body of literature emphasizes the role of government quality—or process—in explaining trust in bureaucracy. Van Ryzin (2011) found that the quality of government, measured by the World Bank’s Worldwide Governance Indicators, plays a more crucial role than government outcomes measured by the UN’s Human Development Index, which had a negative effect in his model. Morelock (2021) also highlights the positive role of government effectiveness, although Houston et al. (2016) finds inconsistent role of government effectiveness. A relatively consistent finding across studies is the significant role of corruption. Van de Walle and Migchelbrink (2022) concluded that the perceived absence of corruption is more impactful on trust in bureaucracy than performance evaluations. The critical influence of perceived corruption and corruption control on public trust in civil servants is also supported by Houston et al. (2016) and Morelock (2021). Beyond these findings, recent research has explored dimensions of government performance, including transparency, agency reputation, and the integration of input, process, and output measures. Studies show that both public and private elite actors’ trust in agencies is strongly influenced by performance (Kappler et al., 2024). Moreover, transparency and perceived organizational reliability have been identified as key factors in shaping public trust (Schmidhuber et al., 2023). Despite these advancements, variations in measures and modeling strategies—such as whether both outcomes and quality indicators are included in the same model—leave uncertainty about the consistency of these results. A more standardized approach is needed to clarify these relationships.

These mixed results also reflect limitations in comparative data, including limited coun-

try coverage, reliance on cross-sectional rather than dynamic analysis, and the absence of comparable measures across countries or regions (Choi, 2018; Houston et al., 2016; Morelock, 2021; Van de Walle and Migchelbrink, 2022; Van Ryzin, 2011). These shortcomings hinder a deeper understanding of the relationship between government outcomes, quality, and trust in bureaucracy.

To address these challenges, we developed the Trust in Civil Servants (TCS) dataset, a dynamic, cross-national measure that enables rigorous testing of competing theories about the sources of trust in civil servants.

### **Examining the Source Data on Trust in Bureaucracy**

Over the past half-century, many national and cross-national surveys have asked questions on trust attitudes toward public administrations. However, these data are sparse—unavailable for many countries and years—and incomparable, derived from different survey items. To construct a dynamic and comparable trust dataset, we undertook an extensive effort to collect and compile relevant survey questions. This involved a systematic review of 132 unique survey projects spanning 125 countries over 49 year to maximize broad geographic and temporal coverage and 27 unique survey questions in capturing public attitudes toward trust in civil servants. To minimize the noise from the sparse data and increase comparability, drawn from the raw data, we followed a common approach (Woo et al., 2023) and excluded 17 survey items that were asked in fewer than five country-years in countries surveyed at least twice.<sup>1</sup>

Together, the survey items in the source data were asked in 98 different countries in at least two time points over 36 years, from 1986 to 2022, yielding a total of 1,814 country-year-item observations. If all of these countries were surveyed in all of these years, we would have 3,528 observations per year and a total of 59,976 country-year-item observations. However, the actual dataset is far more limited, with only 1,344 country-years containing at least some data on trust in civil servants. This accounts for 54% of the 2,475 country-years spanned

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<sup>1</sup>The complete list of trust in civil servants/public administration survey items is included in online Appendix A.

by our dataset. Moreover, the many different survey items employed render these data incomparable and difficult to use together.

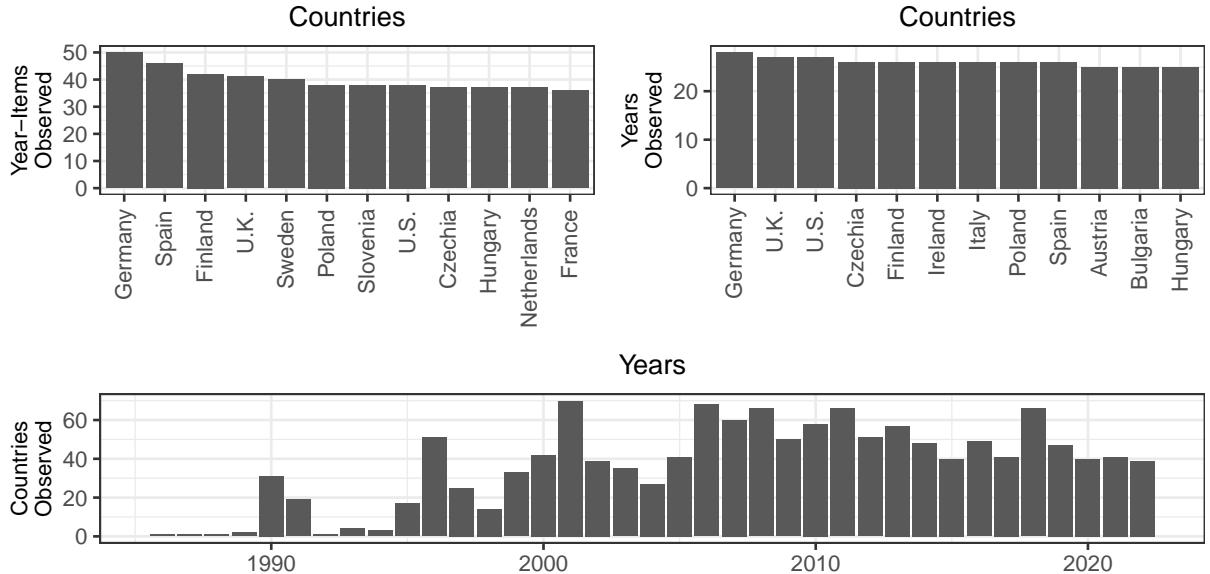


Figure 1: Countries and Years with the Most Observations in the Source Data

Consider the most frequently asked item in the data we collected, which asks respondents whether they strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with the statement “I am going to name a number of institutions. For each one, could you tell me how much trust you have in them. Is it a great deal of trust, some trust, not very much trust or none at all? Civil service.”<sup>2</sup> Employed by the Arab Barometer, the Asia Europe Survey, the Asian Barometer, the British Social Attitudes Survey, the Latino Barometer, the East Asian Social Survey, the European Values Survey, the Italian National Election Study, the South Asian Barometer, and the World Values Survey, this question was asked in a total of 614 different country-years. However, this represents only 25% of the country-years spanned by our data, despite being the *most common* survey item. This again underscores the sparse and often incomparable nature of the available public opinion data on this topic.

<sup>2</sup>Question text may vary slightly across survey datasets, but not, roughly speaking, by more than the translation differences across languages found within the typical cross-national survey dataset. In this case, some questions ask about “the public administration” or “government officials” rather than “the civil service,” and some refer to “confidence” rather than “trust.” These words are often translated identically.

The distribution of country-year-item observations further highlights the limitations of the raw dataset. As depicted in the upper left panel of Figure 1, Germany, with 50 country-year-item observations, is the most represented country, followed by Spain, Finland, the United Kingdom, and Sweden. The upper right panel expands on this by listing the twelve countries with the highest number of years observed, revealing overlaps and differences from the previous group; Ireland, Italy, Austria, and Bulgaria join the list, replacing Sweden, Slovenia, Netherlands, and France. The bottom panel counts the countries observed in each year and reveals just how few relevant survey items were asked before 1996. Country coverage reached its peak in 2001, when respondents in 70 countries were asked items about trust in civil servants.

In the next section, we describe how we leveraged this sparse and incomparable survey data to generate complete, comparable time-series TCS scores using a latent variable model.

### Estimating Trust in Civil Servants

Several latent-variable models of public opinion based on cross-national survey data have been developed recently (Caughey et al., 2019; see Claassen, 2019; Kolczynska et al., 2020; McGann et al., 2019). To estimate trust in civil servants across countries and over time, we employ the recent and suitable method for handling data that is both incomparable and sparse: the Dynamic Comparative Public Opinion (DCPO) model built by Solt (2020c).<sup>3</sup> The DCPO model, a population-level two-parameter ordinal logistic item response theory (IRT) model with country-specific item-bias terms, addresses the two principal challenges posed by our source data: incomparability and sparsity.

The DCPO model accounts for the incomparability of different survey questions with two parameters. First, it incorporates the *difficulty* of each question's responses, that is,

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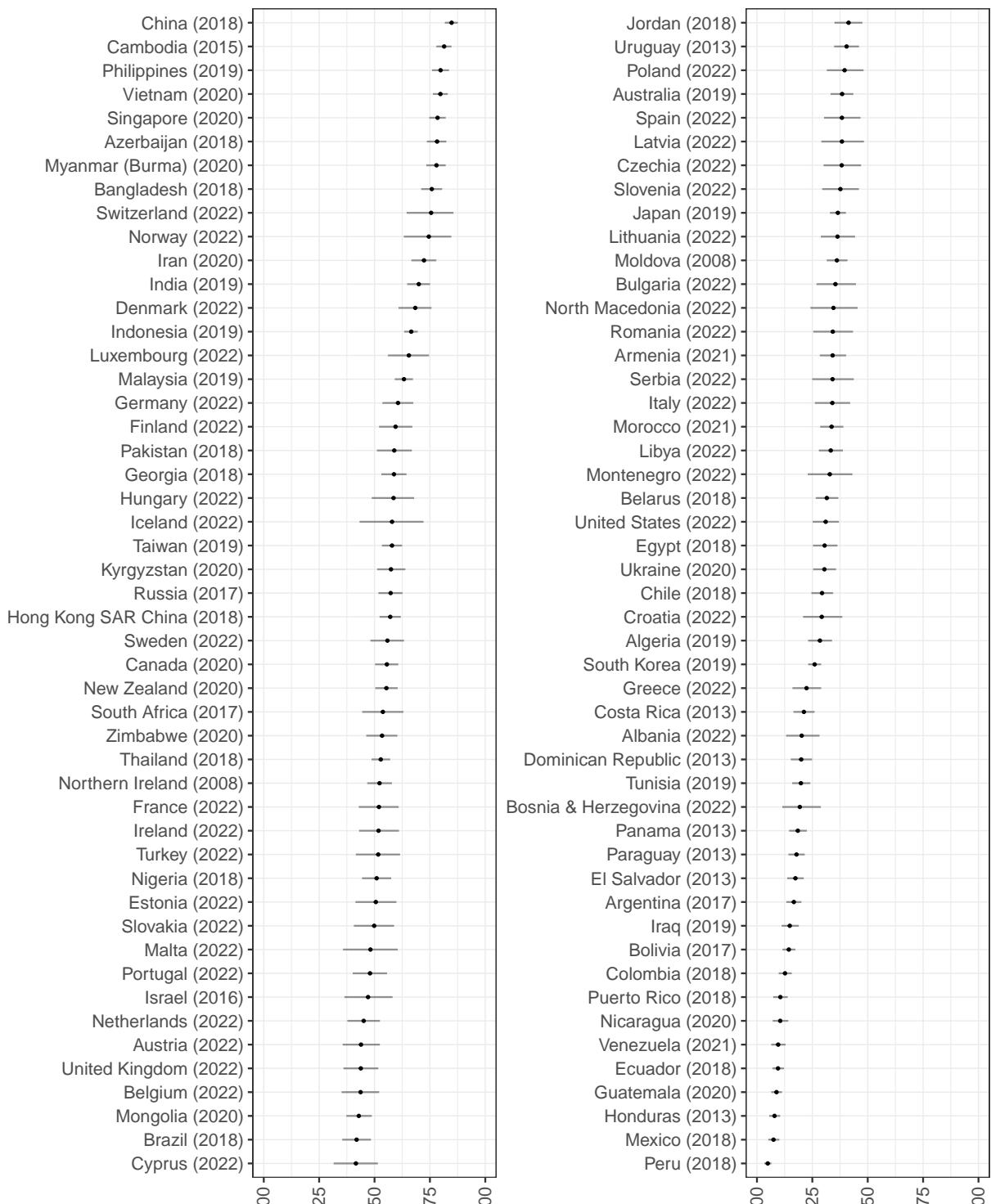
<sup>3</sup>The DCPO model provides a better fit to survey data than the models proposed in Claassen (2019) or Caughey et al. (2019; Solt, 2020c). The model put forward in McGann et al. (2019) depends on dense survey data unlike the sparse data on trust in civil servants just described. Building on all of these four works, Kolczynska et al. (2020) is the very most recent effort, but the multilevel regression and post-stratification (MRP) approach it offers depends both on dense survey data and on additional data describing population characteristics, so it too is inappropriate for our purposes here.

how much trust in civil servants is indicated by a given response. The extent to which each response reflects the latent trait is most clearly demonstrated through ordinal responses to the same question: strongly agreeing with the statement “Most government administrators (civil servants) can be trusted to do what is best for the country,” exhibits more trust in civil servants than simply agreeing, which shows more trust than responding “disagree,” which in turn is a more trusting response than “strongly disagree.” This logic extends across different questions as well. For example, expressing “great trust” in civil servants “to look after your interests” likely expresses even more trust than just strongly agreeing that civil servants can be trusted to do what is right. Second, the DCPO model accounts for each question’s *dispersion*, its noisiness with regard to our latent trait. The lower a question’s dispersion, the better that changes in responses to the question map onto changes in trust of civil servants. Together, the model’s difficulty and dispersion estimates work to generate comparable estimates of the latent variable of trust in civil servants from the available but incomparable source data.

To address the sparsity of the source data, characterized by gaps in the time series for each country and many country-years with only a single available item, the DCPO model employs random-walk priors for each country. This means that within each country, a given year’s trust level is modeled as the previous year’s estimate plus a random shock. These random-walk priors smooth trust estimates over time, allowing the generation of estimates even for years with little or no data, albeit with greater measurement uncertainty. For more information on the DCPO model, see Appendix B and Solt (2020c: 3–8).

We estimated the model using the `DCP0tools` package for R (Solt, 2020a), running four chains for 1,000 iterations each and discarding the first half as warmup, which left us with 2,000 samples. The  $\hat{R}$  diagnostic had a maximum value of 1.01, indicating that the model converged. The dispersion parameters of the survey items indicate that all of our source data items load well on the latent variable (see Appendix A).

The result is estimates, in all 2,475 country-years spanned by the source data, of public trust in civil servants, what we call TCS scores. Figure 2 displays the most recent available



Note: Gray whiskers represent 80% credible intervals.

Figure 2: TCS Scores, Most Recent Available Year

TCS score for each of the 98 countries and territories in the dataset.

Asian countries, especially those with a history of meritocracy, dominate the top of the list. The least corrupt counties, like Switzerland, Norway, Denmark and Finland, also rank highly. On the other hand, the latest scores for Peru, Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, and Ecuador have them as the places where the public has the lowest trust toward civil servants. The bottom-ranked countries are either among the most corrupt, like Venezuela, or have high crime rates, like Peru and Honduras.

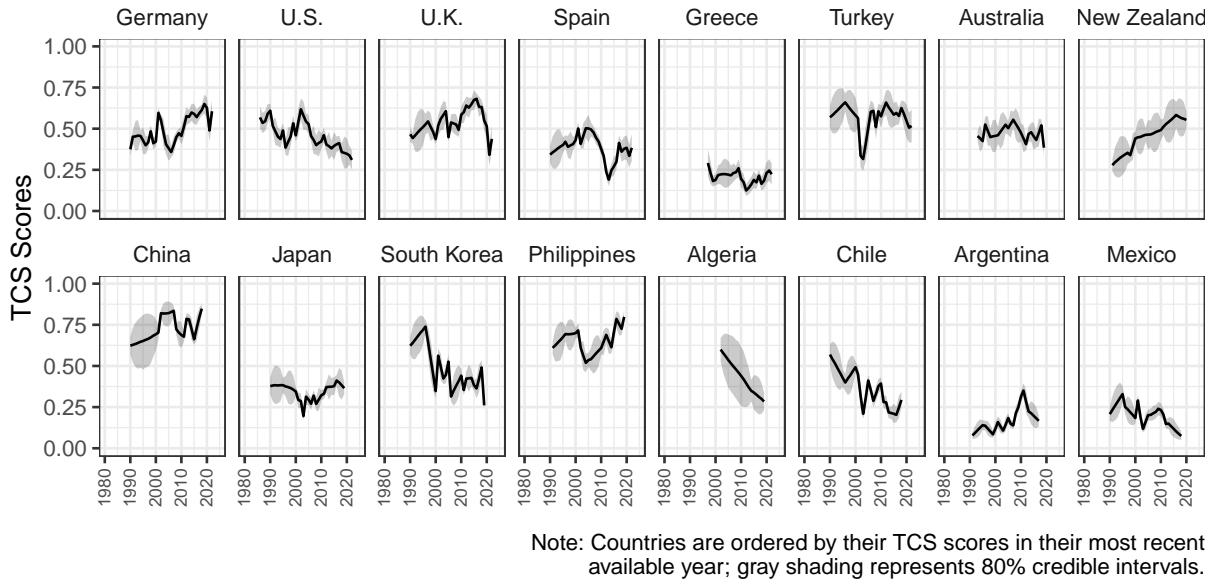


Figure 3: TCS Scores Over Time Within Selected Countries

We show the changes of TCS over time in sixteen countries in Figure 3. As displayed in Figure 2, the dataset covers a wide geographic breadth, allowing comparative studies of countries and regions too often neglected (see Wilson and Knutsen, 2022). Figure 3 also shows that trust in civil servants has risen prominently in some countries, such as Germany and New Zealand, while remaining fairly constant over time in others, like Greece and Australia. In contrast, TCS scores have fallen steadily in countries such as South Korea and the United States. Some countries exhibit fluctuations, as seen in the United Kingdom, where trust has advanced and retreated, or the Philippines, where trust has declined and later recovered. Together, the differences within countries over time and the differences

across countries present a challenge to theories on the causes and consequences of trust in civil servants.

## Validating Trust in Civil Servants

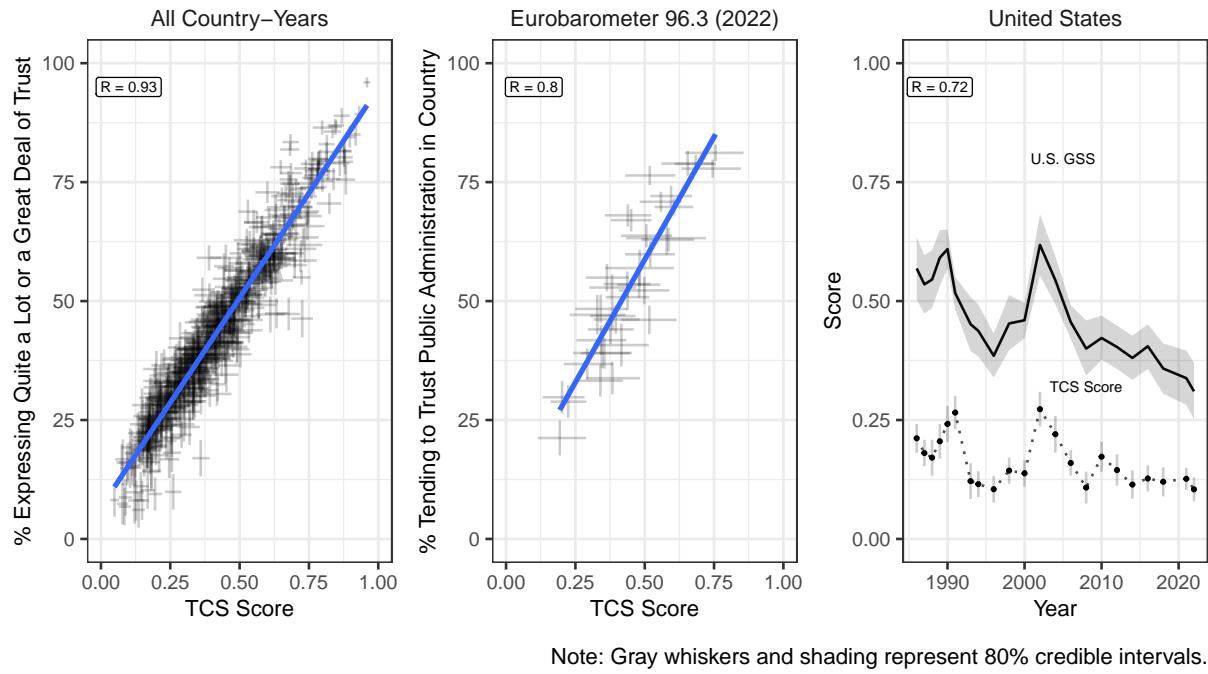


Figure 4: Convergent Validation: Correlations Between TSC Scores and Individual TSC Source-Data Survey Items

Before using these estimates in analysis, we validate our trust civil service score through convergent validation and construct validation, since validation tests of cross-national latent variables are crucially important (see, e.g., Hu et al., 2024). Figure 4 shows the measure's validity in tests of convergent validation that tests whether a measure is empirically associated with alternative indicators of the same concept (Adcock and Collier, 2001: 540). We started with ‘internal’ convergent validation test (see, e.g., Caughey et al., 2019: 689; Solt, 2020c: 10) by comparing our TCS score with individual items from source-data to generate them.

The left panel in Figure 4 shows a scatterplot of country-years in which the TCS scores

are plotted against the percentage of respondents who expressed “a quite a lot” or “a great deal” of trust in response to the question: “I am going to name a number of institutions. For each one, could you tell me how much trust you have in them. Is it a great deal of trust, some trust, not very much trust or none at all? Civil service.” The strong correlation ( $R = 0.93$ ) indicates that TCS scores effectively capture variations in trust in civil service across country-years.

The middle panel plots our TCS score against the percentage who responded “Tend to trust.” to the question, “I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain institutions. For each of the following institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it: Public administration in (OUR COUNTRY)” in the Eurobarometer 96.3 January-February 2022 module. This question is asked in the most countries, and the strong correlation demonstrates the broad applicability of the TCS scores in capturing trust across diverse contexts.

Finally, the right panel compares the trend of the longest item that has been asked since 1973 in U.S. General Social Survey, “I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them? Executive branch of the federal government.” to the trend of the TCS scores. The TCS scores align with trends in trust in the executive branch over time, effectively capturing historical changes.

Figure 5 present three ‘external’ convergent validation tests, comparing TCS scores to responses to survey items that were *not* included in the source data: items that asked respondents’ confidence and trust in national government, parliament, and judiciary in their countries. In the left panel, we plot TCS score against data from seven rounds of World Value Survey, which asked respondents how much they trust their national government. The center plot shows data from European Values Surveys asking respondents’ confidence in parliament. The right presents the percentage of respondents who expressed at least some trust in judiciary in their country in Latinobarometro. Our measure positively correlated with all of them, with a stronger correlation with trust in national government and mild

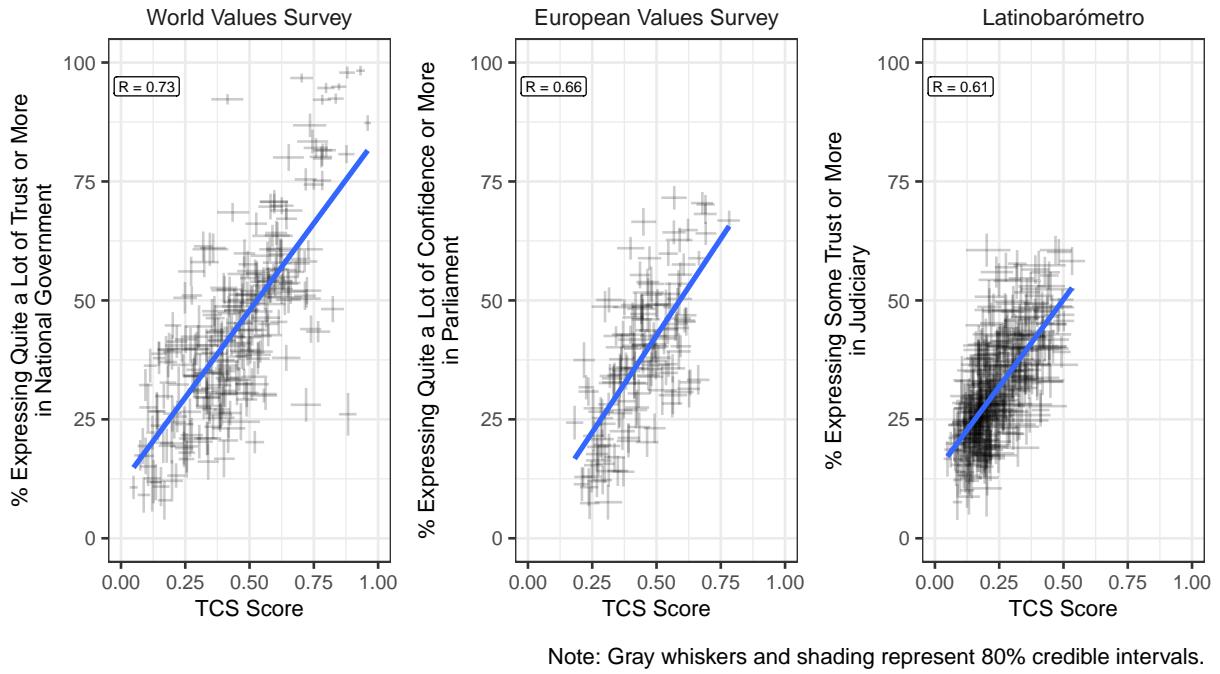


Figure 5: Construct Validation: Correlations Between TCS Scores and Trust in Institutions Survey Items

correlation with trust in parliament and judiciary.

There is a longstanding debate about the dimensionality of political trust (Easton, 1965; Marien and Hooghe, 2011; Norris, 2011; Rothstein and Stolle, 2008; Tai, 2022). Trust in civil servants has been theoretically grouped within the same dimension as all three types of institutional trust (Hooghe, 2011; Marien and Hooghe, 2011), or one of them (Norris, 2011; Rothstein and Stolle, 2008; Tai, 2022). However, the variation in correlations between TCS scores and trust in institutions requires empirical analysis of trust's dimensions.

We next conduct tests of construct validation in Figure 6. Construct validation assesses whether a given indicator is empirically correlated with other indicators in a way that conforms to theoretical expectations (Adcock and Collier, 2001: 542). Corruption is often argued as a likely contributor to distrust in civil servants and public administration (see, e.g., Anderson and Tverdova, 2003; Van de Walle and Migchelbrink, 2022; Van Ryzin, 2011).

The left panel compares perceived widespread of corruption, measured as the percentage

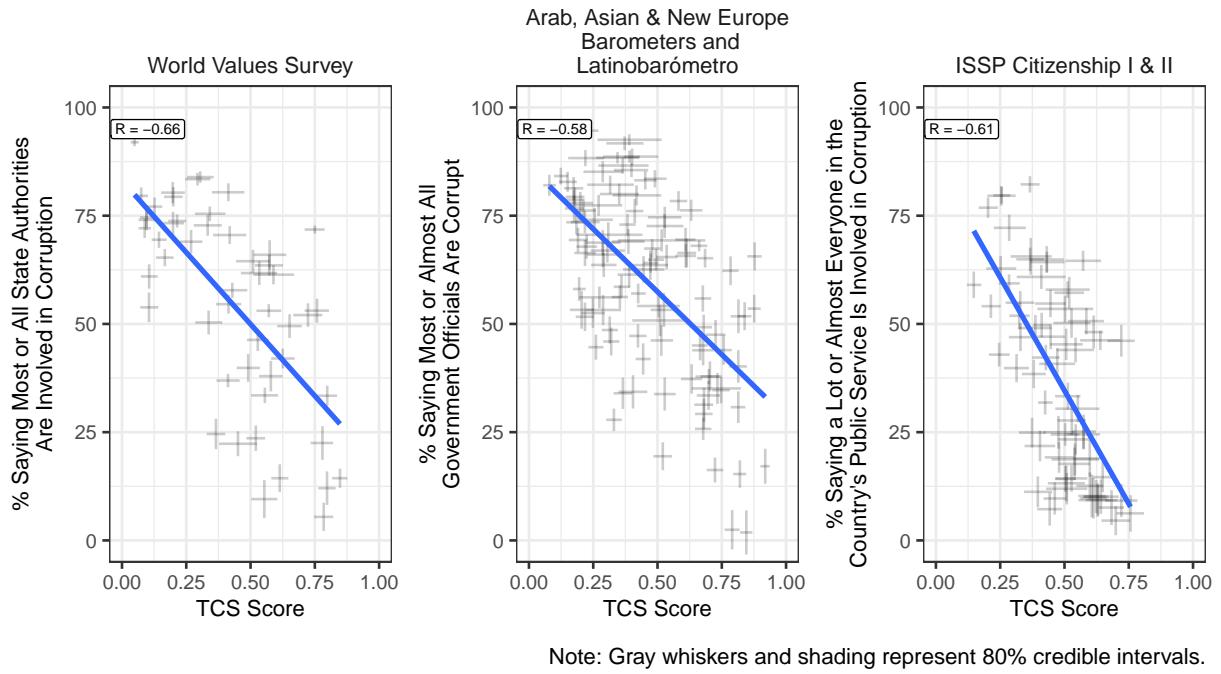


Figure 6: Construct Validation: Correlations Between TCS Scores and Corruption of Public Servants Survey Items

of those saying most or state authorities are involved in corruption in seven waves of the WVS, with the TCS scores. As anticipated, there is a clear negative relationship between the spread of perceived corruption and the TCS scores: when there is widespread perception of corruption in authorities, the public tends to distrust civil servants. The similar negative correlations between TCS scores and perceived corruption among government officials are also perceived in the center and right panel of Figure 6, which used data from different regions. The center panel shows the data in developing or newly democratic countries surveyed in the Asian Barometer, the New Europe Barometer, and the Latinobarómetro, and the right panel displays the data in countries surveyed in the International Social Survey Programme Citizenship module (2004, 2014).

To sum up, the evidence of construct validation of TCS scores against the perceived extent of corruption in Figure 6, together with the evidence of external validation in Figure 5 and convergent validation in Figure 4, demonstrates the validity of the TCS scores as measures

of the public's trust in civil servants.

## Explaining Trust in Civil Servants

With our time-series cross-national data on trust in civil servants, we combined both outcome and quality indicators to examine the factors influencing this trust. For outcome indicators, we followed previous studies and used GDP per capita, inflation, and unemployment from 1984 to 2022 as measures of macroeconomic performance. GDP per capita and inflation data were sourced from the International Monetary Fund, while unemployment data were collected from the World Bank, which uses modeled International Labour Organization estimates. Regarding income inequality, we relied on the Standardized World Income Inequality Database presented in Solt (2020b), specifically the Gini index of inequality in disposable income.

For quality of government indicators, we included the Corruption Perceptions Index from Transparency International, covering the years 1995 to 2022, to capture the perceived level of corruption. We also used the Government Effectiveness indicator from the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators, as it reflects the overall quality of public services, the civil service, and policy formulation and implementation.

To further leverage our trust data, we collected the number of intentional homicides at the country-year level from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, capturing outcomes in public safety, given that macroeconomic outcomes do not represent government performance in other critical fields (Morelock, 2021; Van Ryzin, 2011). To account for the effect of democratic development on trust, we included the Liberal Democracy Index from the V-Dem dataset (Coppedge et al., 2023; Pemstein et al., 2023).

We adopted a Bayesian multilevel model with varying intercepts for each country and each year. The varying intercepts for each country account for heteroskedasticity across countries, while those for each year account for 'time shocks' that impact all countries simultaneously (Shor et al., 2007). To differentiate between short-term and historical effects, we used the 'within-between random effects' specification as described by Bell and Jones (2015; see also

Woo et al., 2023). This approach models, for each time-varying predictor, the time-invariant country mean alongside the time-varying difference from this mean for each country-year.

Finally, we addressed measurement uncertainty in the data for trust in bureaucracy, income inequality, and the Corruption Perceptions Index by incorporating it into the analysis (see Tai et al., 2024). The model was estimated using the `brms` R package (Bürkner, 2017).

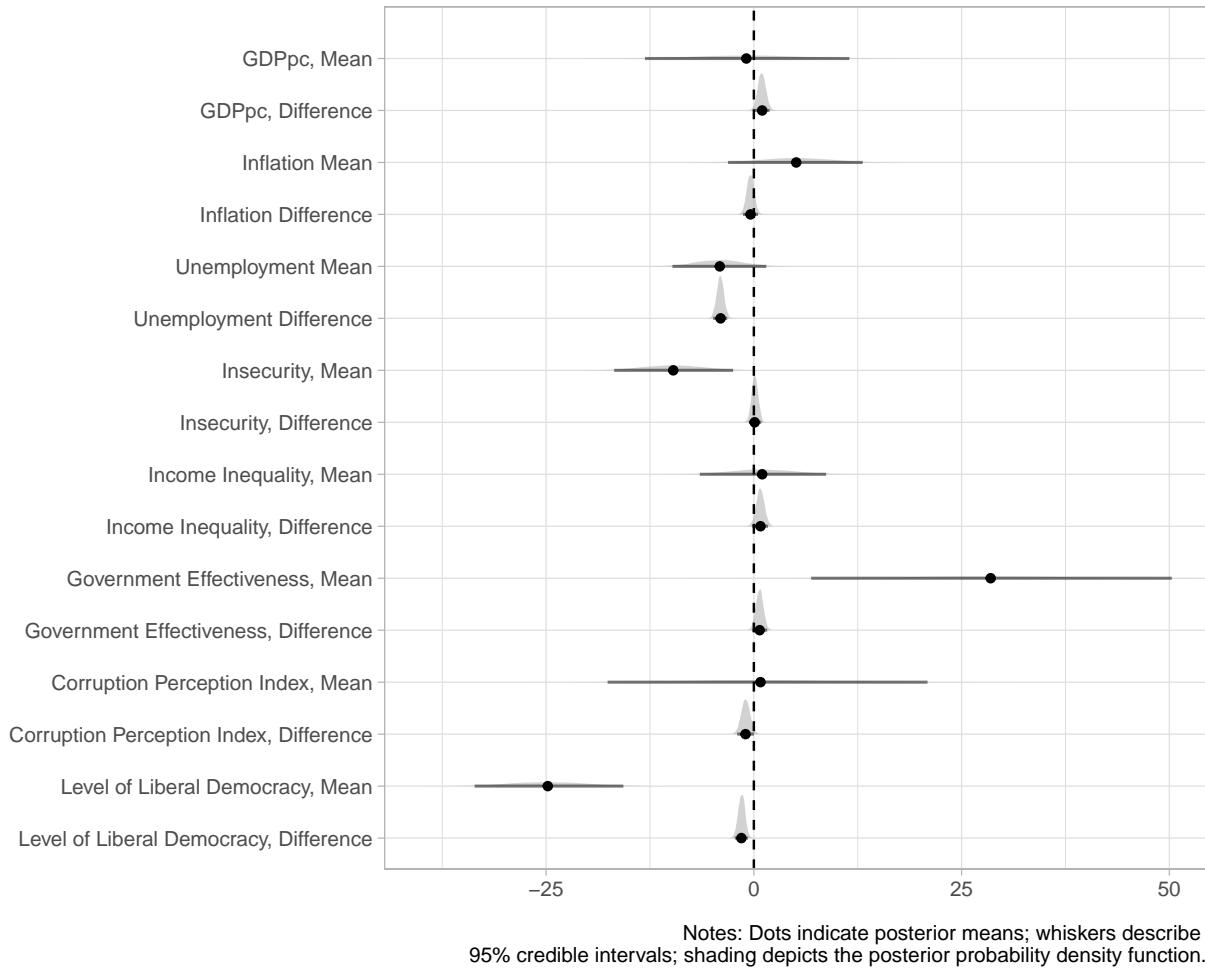


Figure 7: Predicting Trust in Civil Servants Across Countries Over Time

The results are presented in Figure 7. In terms of economic outcomes, the increase in GDP per capita is associated with a higher level of trust in civil servants in the short term. A two-standard-deviation year-to-year change in per capita income increases trust by 1 (95% c.i.: 0 to 1.9) point. This significant but relatively small effect suggests that GDP growth

alone may not be sufficient to sustain high levels of trust in civil servants, given that economic growth may not transfer to effective resource management and service delivery.

Unemployment exhibits a strong negative effect on trust in civil servants, with a two-standard-deviation year-to-year increase in unemployment decreasing trust in civil servants by 4 (95% c.i.: -4.9 to -3.2) points. High unemployment rates can signal government inefficiency or failure to address critical economic challenges, eroding trust in civil servants.

In terms of public safety, the mean number of intentional homicides has a long-term negative impact on trust in civil servants. A two-standard deviation increase in a country's mean number of homicides is associated with 9.7 (95% c.i.: -16.8 to -2.5) points less trust. High levels of violence and insecurity can undermine public confidence in the administration's competence to uphold law and order, diminishing trust in its civil service (Berg and Johansson, 2016; Uddin, Forthcoming). We found no evidence that either inflation or income inequality significantly affects trust in civil servants in the short or long term, when other factors are controlled.

Regarding process, a higher government effectiveness score has a strong positive long-term effect on trust in civil servants. A two-standard deviation increase in a country's mean effectiveness score is associated with 28.5 (95% c.i.: 6.9 to 50.3) points more trust across countries. This finding suggests that improving the perceived quality of public services and policy formulation can lead to a sustained increase in trust. Coproduction of public value provides a compelling explanation, emphasizing how involving individuals in policy-making processes can strengthen trust in the public sector (Schmidhuber et al., 2021).

Although democratic capacity is found to mediate the relationship between government openness and public trust (Schmidhuber et al., 2021), we found the development of democracy is associated with less trust in civil servants, both in the long run and in the short term. Critical citizens in more democratic countries may trust civil servant only critically and have higher expectations of them (Norris, 1999). However, perceived corruption was not consistently associated with trust in civil servants in either the long term or short run; these estimates are close to zero.

We find evidence for arguments on both government outcomes and government quality. However, government quality, measured by mean government effectiveness—exert larger effects over long term than economic and public security outcomes like GDP per capita, unemployment, and insecurity. To sustain trust in civil servants, policymakers and practitioners should prioritize institutional reforms that enhance effectiveness and inclusiveness.

## Discussion

The study of trust’s role in policy processes has long been hindered by the absence of comparable measures of trust in civil servants—key actors in policy implementation—across countries and over time. This gap has impeded efforts to identify the causes and consequences of bureaucratic trust, resulting in mixed findings regarding its origins and influence on policy support and implementation.

Using a state-of-the-art latent-variable model (Solt, 2020c), we develop a dynamic, comparative measure of trust in civil servants that uncovers significant variations both within and across countries. Our analysis reveals that while economic performance and public security influence trust in the short term, government quality and effectiveness in service delivery and policy implementation have more enduring effects.

While this study focuses on the sources of trust in civil servants, the publicly accessible Trust in Civil Servants (TCS) dataset also offers new opportunities to examine critical policy questions. Researchers can investigate how varying levels of trust in bureaucracy affect policy implementation, citizen compliance with regulations, and public acceptance of policy interventions. The dataset’s longitudinal nature enables analysis of how changes in trust relate to policy reforms, implementation strategies, and policy outcomes. These applications are particularly relevant for complex policy challenges that require sustained public cooperation and support.

By offering robust, comparable measures across countries and time, the TCS dataset provides a foundation for advancing our understanding of the intricate relationship between trust in civil servants and policy success. This contribution helps resolve ongoing debates

about trust's role in governance, offering actionable insights for both scholars and policy-makers.

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