

# **Unravelling the Dimensions of Australian Political Trust and Distrust**

## **Computational Insights from Open-Ended Responses**

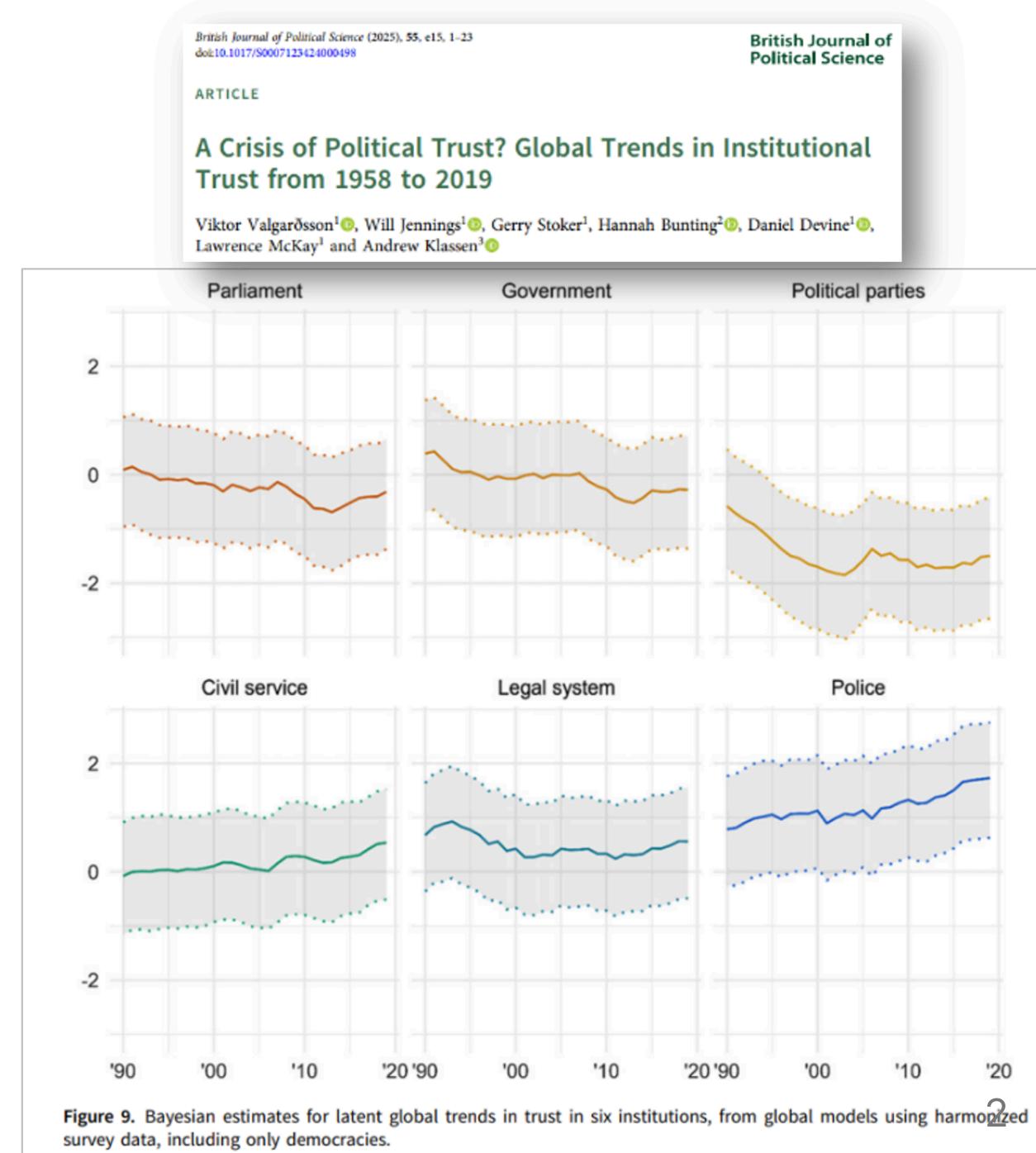
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Australian Society for Quantitative Political Science 2025, Melbourne

# Motivation

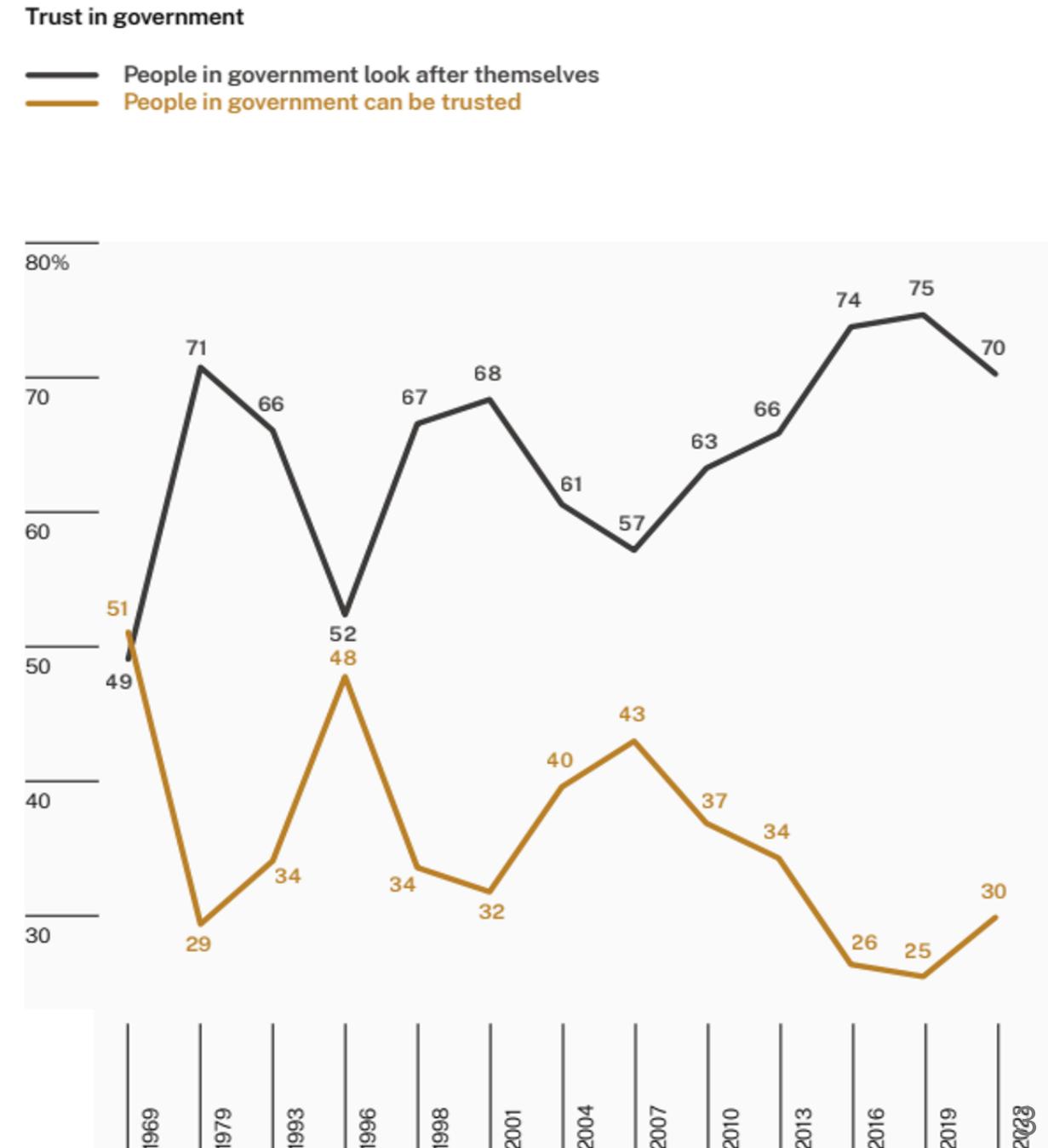
- Political trust is central to democratic legitimacy (Easton, 1975)
  - **Diffuse trust:** faith in system
  - **Specific trust:** trust in current officeholders
- Declining trust across democracies since the 1970s

Data based on 3,377 surveys conducted by 50 projects in 143 countries over the 60 year period (1958–2019), including 89 countries rating as liberal or electoral democracies for a majority of those years



# Motivation

- Declining trust across democracies since the 1970s
- Australia mirrors this trajectory
- Most studies measure and track **how much people trust, not why**



## Drivers of Political Trust

- Partisanship effects: governing party advantage (Anderson & LoTempio 2002)
- Identity & marginalisation: trust gaps by ethnicity, class (Wilkes 2015)
- Performance feedback: policy and process failure lead to decline of trust (Van Ryzin 2011, McAllister & Cornelissen 2013)
- However...trust as a reservoir and could maintain legitimacy in hard times (Easton 1975) ⇒ worth saving / need to be saved

# Literature Gap

- Trust research focuses on aggregate levels, rarely on underlying rationales
- Existing measures impose the similar schema (Grimmelikhuijsen & Knies 2017; Hamm et al 2019, Weinberg 2023)
  - ‘ABI model’ dominates (Mayer et al 1995):
    - Ability
    - Benevolence
    - Integrity
- Lack of integration between quantitative trust level and qualitative narratives
- Need for ***citizen-centred, inductive*** approaches

Study	Mayer et al 1995	Hetherington & Rudolph 2008	OECD 2017,2025	World Values Survey 2017-2021 (Wave 7)		Grimmelikhuijsen & Knies 2017	Hamm et al. 2019; Weinberg 2023	Devine et al 2024	Seyd 2024				
Focus/context	Organisational trust (internal)	Political trust	Public trust in institutions	Political trust (Parliament, The Govt, UN)	Norris 2022	Public trust in public institutions (external)	Political trust	Govt (political institutional) trustworthiness	Trust in politicians				
Survey question dimensions / constructs used	1	Ability	Performance		Competence & efficiency	Competence & efficiency	Competence	Ability	Competence	Competence			
	2	Benevolence			Duty execution								
	3	Process	Responsiveness						Benevolence				
	4		Openness		Motivation		Benevolence	Benevolence					
	5	Integrity		Reliability		Openness and transparency							
	6					Intention	Impartiality	Integrity	Integrity	Integrity			
	7		Probitry										
	8				Integrity	Freedom from corruption	Integrity						
	9	Priming			Fairness								
	10												

# Why a Bottom-up Approach

- Closed-ended items constrain meaning (Bertsou 2019)
- Risk of imposing *elite* definitions onto public perceptions
- May conflate intensity with reason (e.g. "how much" trust without "why")
- **Open-ended responses** let people define trust on their terms
  - and reveal richer moral and experiential logics
- Enables inductive thematic discovery



**ARC Discovery Project 2023-27**  
**'Mapping & Harnessing Public Trust & Mistrust'**

- Developing a robust measure of public trust

# Data: Australian Constitutional Values Survey 2023

- National sample ( $N=1,200$ )
  - Stratified national random sample (adults, citizens and permanent residents), postweighted
  - Computer Assisted Telephone Interviews (CATI) via OmniPoll, October–November 2023
- Four trust open-ended questions: "*Can you think of a...*"
  - Politician trusted and why? ( $n=567$ )
  - Politician distrusted and why? ( $n=943$ )
  - Agency trusted and why? ( $n=623$ )
  - Agency distrusted and why? ( $n=649$ )

## Open-ended Items

- Allows analysis of trust *targets* and *reasons*
- Capture subjective, respondent-supplied language:

*Cause the body language he uses / the way he looks at you in the eye / shows he is being honest //*

*Lots of reasons/He has very evasive eyes/He acted in bad faith on referendum/Deliberately spread misinformation and disinformation to win referendum at all costs//*

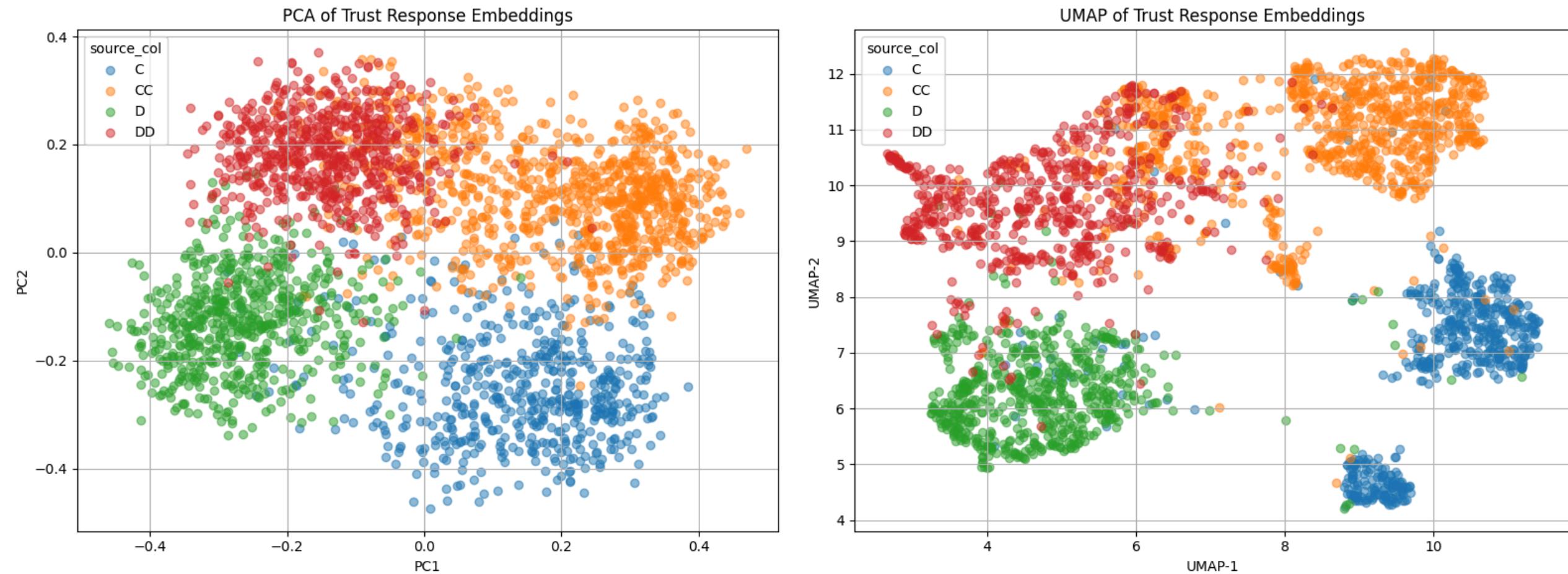
- Enable both supervised and unsupervised modelling

# Discovering Emergent Trust Dimensions

- Implement a 5-step pipeline to inductively discover trust/distrust themes in open-ended responses
  - (Preparation) → Semantic Embedding → Clustering the Response Space → Label Clusters Using LLM → Propose Trust Dimensions →
  - Scoring Responses on Inductive Trust Dimensions:
    - 4.00 = the response is extremely about this dimension,
    - 3.xx = mostly about this dimension,
    - 2.xx = somewhat about this dimension,
    - 1.xx = slightly about this dimension,
    - 0.00 = not at all about this dimension.
- Bottom-up identification of trustworthiness drivers beyond predefined codeframes.

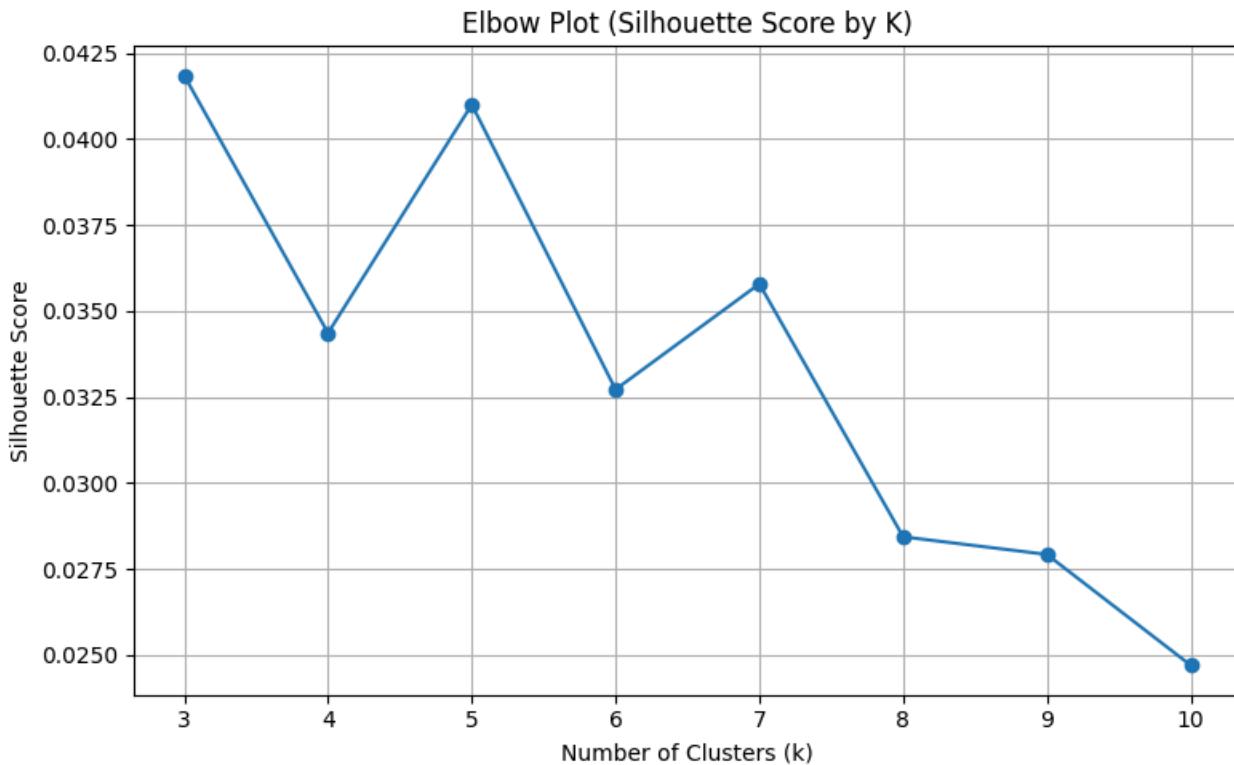
# Results

# Embedding Distribution (PCA + UMAP)



# Clustering the Response Space

- $k = 3$  achieves highest separation (score=0.042);  $k = 5$  shows a secondary local peak
- Scores decline after  $k = 7$ : over-segmentation
- Scores are modest overall
- A 3 to 6 cluster solution is semantically coherent and parsimonious for dimension building



## **== Cluster 1 | Label: Effective, reliable delivery == (Ability in the ABI model)**

Theme: Respondents in this cluster trust institutions and politicians mainly because they see them as competent, effective and delivering on what they promise. They highlight concrete positive experiences: services work smoothly, payments are on time, data is handled securely, regulations are enforced, and projects are completed. People often mention clear rules and processes, careful information-gathering, and accountability as signs that agencies are doing their jobs properly despite limited resources. Trust is frequently grounded in direct personal interactions where agencies were fair, efficient, and helpful, especially in health, tax, defence, education, and local infrastructure.

Proposed Dimension: **performance/reliability**

Sample Responses:

Respondents in this cluster trust institutions and politicians mainly because they see them as competent, effective and delivering on what they promise. They highlight concrete positive experiences: services work smoothly, payments are on time, data is handled securely, regulations are enforced, and projects are completed. People often mention clear rules and processes, careful information-gathering, and accountability as signs that agencies are doing their jobs properly despite limited resources. Trust is frequently grounded in direct personal interactions where agencies were fair, efficient, and helpful, especially in health, tax, defence, education, and local infrastructure.

## **== Cluster 2 | Label: Self-interest and corruption == (Benevolence in the ABI model)?**

Theme: Respondents describe politicians and agencies as self-serving, captured by big business or "big pharma", and routinely dishonest or deceptive. They highlight lies, broken promises, cover-ups and corruption, including bribery, nepotism and policy decisions shaped by vested interests rather than the public good. Many also reference concrete failures (bushfires, COVID, potholes, welfare errors, child protection, policing) as evidence that officials don't care about or protect ordinary people, and sometimes actively harm them. Overall, the sense is that the system is rigged in favour of powerful interests and against "little people", making government fundamentally untrustworthy.

### **Proposed Dimension: honesty/integrity or corruption**

#### **Sample Responses:**

Respondents describe politicians and agencies as self-serving, captured by big business or "big pharma", and routinely dishonest or deceptive. They highlight lies, broken promises, cover-ups and corruption, including bribery, nepotism and policy decisions shaped by vested interests rather than the public good. Many also reference concrete failures (bushfires, COVID, potholes, welfare errors, child protection, policing) as evidence that officials don't care about or protect ordinary people, and sometimes actively harm them. Overall, the sense is that the system is rigged in favour of powerful interests and against "little people", making government fundamentally untrustworthy.

### **== Cluster 3 | Label: Honesty, lies and agendas == (Integrity in the ABI model)**

Theme: Respondents focus heavily on whether politicians are honest, consistent and transparent, especially around high-profile issues like the Voice referendum and past scandals. Many describe leaders as liars, deceptive, or hiding their true motives, while a minority praise those they see as genuine, straight-talking and keeping promises. There is strong concern about broken election commitments, shifting positions, and withholding information, which are taken as signs of a hidden agenda or self-interest. A few also link (dis)trust to perceived integrity grounded in personal values (e.g. Christian beliefs) or personal encounters, but the dominant theme is truthfulness versus deceit.

Proposed Dimension: **honesty/integrity or corruption**

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# Synthesising Emergent Dimensions

After clustering and labelling, we ask GPT (via API; `gpt-5-mini` was used) to:

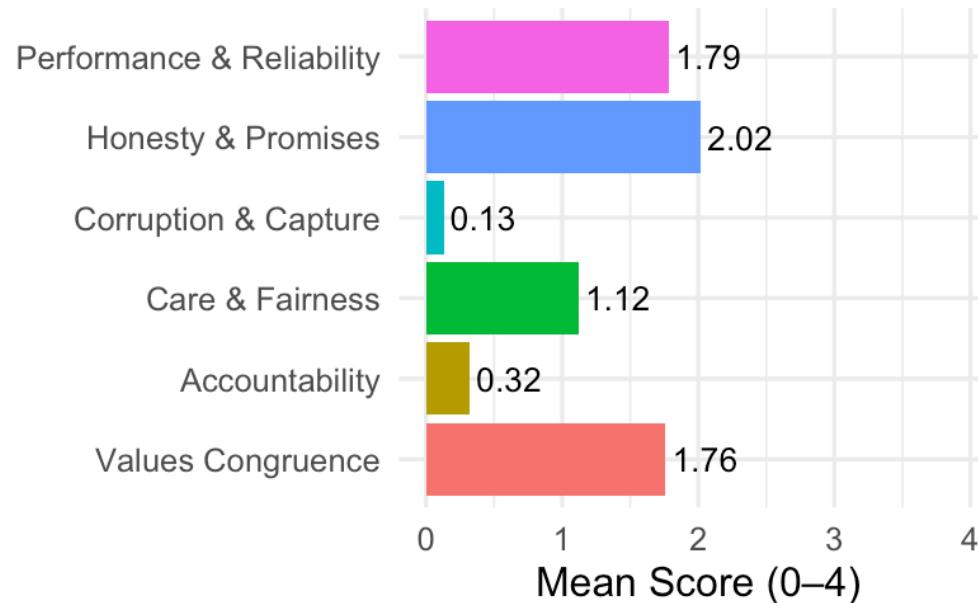
- Review all labelled clusters
- Group them into parsimonious higher-order dimensions
- Define each dimension and assign relevant clusters

Output: 6 proposed dimensions...inductively derived from common language

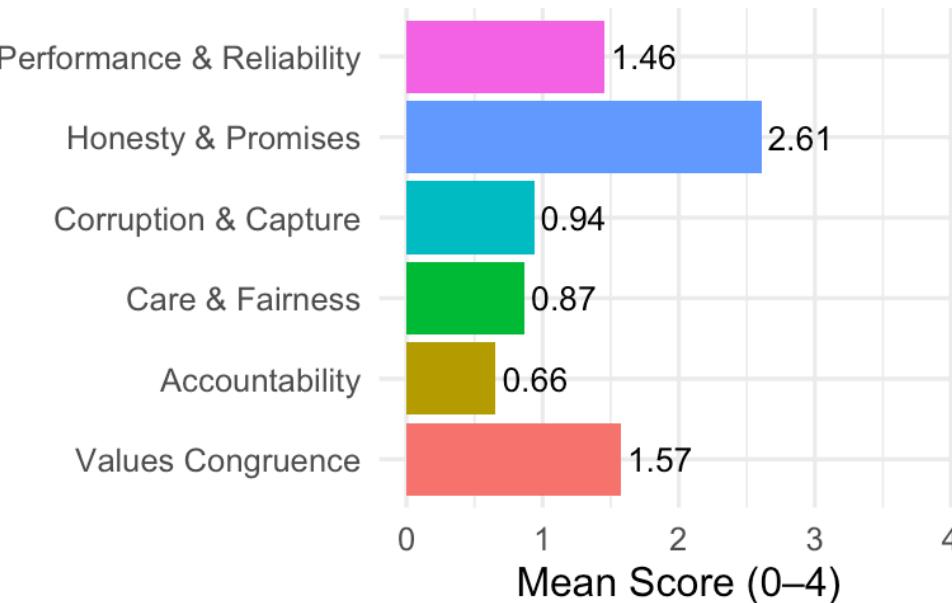
#	Dim
1	<p><b>Performance &amp; Reliability (A)</b></p> <p>Trust hinges on institutions delivering services competently, on time, and as promised. It reflects smooth operations, clear processes, secure data handling, and visible project completion or enforcement, grounded in people's concrete experiences.</p>
2	<p><b>Honesty, Promises &amp; Hidden Agendas (I)</b></p> <p>This dimension focuses on truthfulness, consistency, and transparency versus deceit, broken promises, or hidden motives. Trust is granted when politicians are straight-talking and follow through; distrust arises with deliberate deceit, shifting positions, or hidden agendas, especially in major issues.</p>
3	<p><b>Corruption, Capture &amp; Systemic Self-Interest</b></p> <p>This dimension assesses whether the political system serves the public interest or is captured by powerful actors and personal gain. Distrust grows with perceptions of bribery, nepotism, cover-ups, and policy favoring big business or insiders over ordinary citizens, creating a sense that the system is rigged.</p>
4	<p><b>Care, Fairness &amp; Ethical Treatment (B)</b></p> <p>This dimension assesses whether institutions care about people's wellbeing, treat them fairly, and avoid harm, especially to vulnerable groups. Trust increases when agencies show empathy, flexibility, and ethical judgement; distrust rises when they appear indifferent, punitive, or capable of causing harm through rigid or unethical practices.</p>
5	<p><b>Accountability &amp; Rule-Bound Governance</b></p> <p>This dimension concerns whether institutions operate within clear, lawful rules and are held accountable when things go wrong. Trust is strengthened by transparency, oversight, and consequences for misconduct; distrust grows with scandals suggesting weak accountability or immunity for those in power.</p>
6	<p><b>Values Congruence &amp; Moral Integrity</b></p> <p>This dimension concerns alignment between leaders' motives and citizens' moral or religious values. Trust is higher when politicians appear principled and sincere; distrust arises when behaviour is seen as morally hollow, opportunistic, or inconsistent with professed values.</p>

#	Dim
1	<p><b>Performance &amp; Reliability (A)</b></p> <p>He practiced what he preached / He spent 2 weeks in aboriginal communities to help them/ He did what he said he would do// I think he did a lot for people for example he did a lot for public transport and quality of living for poor/he is kind and genuine</p>
2	<p><b>Honesty, Promises &amp; Hidden Agendas (I)</b></p> <p>Because he comes across as a liar / and he look after his mates / he does not care for the country what is in it for himself / for example how he carried out the voice referendum / he did not tell anyone about the truth about it / garbage / he is a slimy little rat //</p>
3	<p><b>Corruption, Capture &amp; Systemic Self-Interest</b></p> <p>They are for only one reason/ to put money ion their pockets and get a superannuation// they follow their own agenda / for their own personal benefit /They are selling our country and they should be shot//</p>
4	<p><b>Care, Fairness &amp; Ethical Treatment (B)</b></p> <p>they have always been very efficient and caring / I have had many dealings with them I have a disability and they have always been supportive // they govern my country to the way I like it / they look after the disabled // Because they care for their patrons/They try and facilitate their needs to the job requirements of the individuals who use their service/</p>
5	<p><b>Accountability &amp; Rule-Bound Governance</b></p> <p>there is no accountability/no one that has to take responsibility for anything/its just a pot of money that people are dishonest about and can claim for stuff that they shouldn't be/disabled benefits that shouldn't be granted/a lot of services that get there money from NDIS and they shouldn't get them/its all an automated computerised set up that just doesn't care about the people and pretends that everyone is honest when it doesn't work like that/major concern/we waste money by letting people take it who don't need it//</p>
6	<p><b>Values Congruence &amp; Moral Integrity</b></p> <p>I think he has values that I support, I'm confident that overall he's exercising leadership in the best interest of most people in Australia/ his leadership on the voice was positive; the fact that the majority of people in Australia didn't support it; I thought it was the right idea to support and advocate for a voice as a decision for the best interests of Australia// Where he came from, grassroots, upstanding type of person</p>

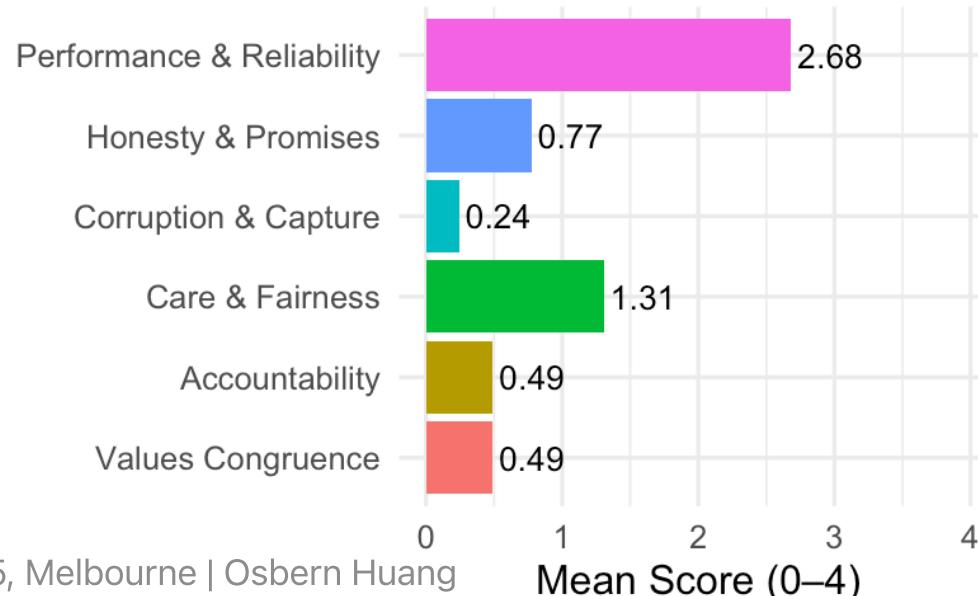
## Trust in Politician



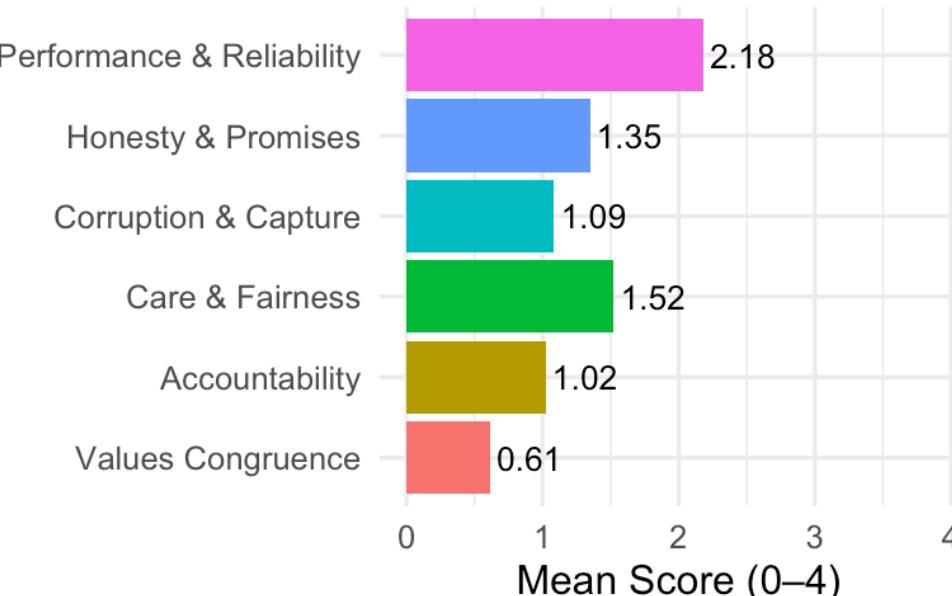
## Distrust in Politician



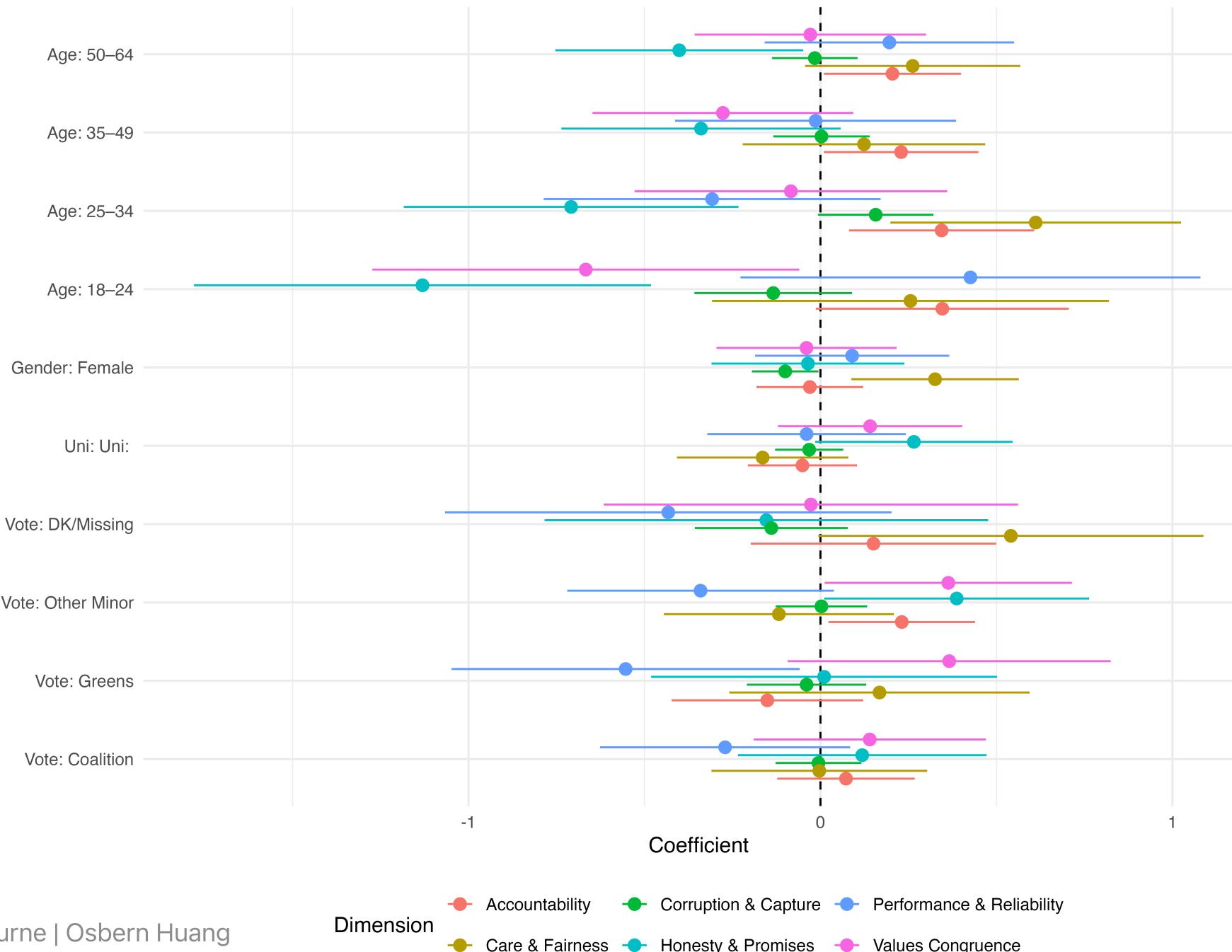
## Trust in Agency



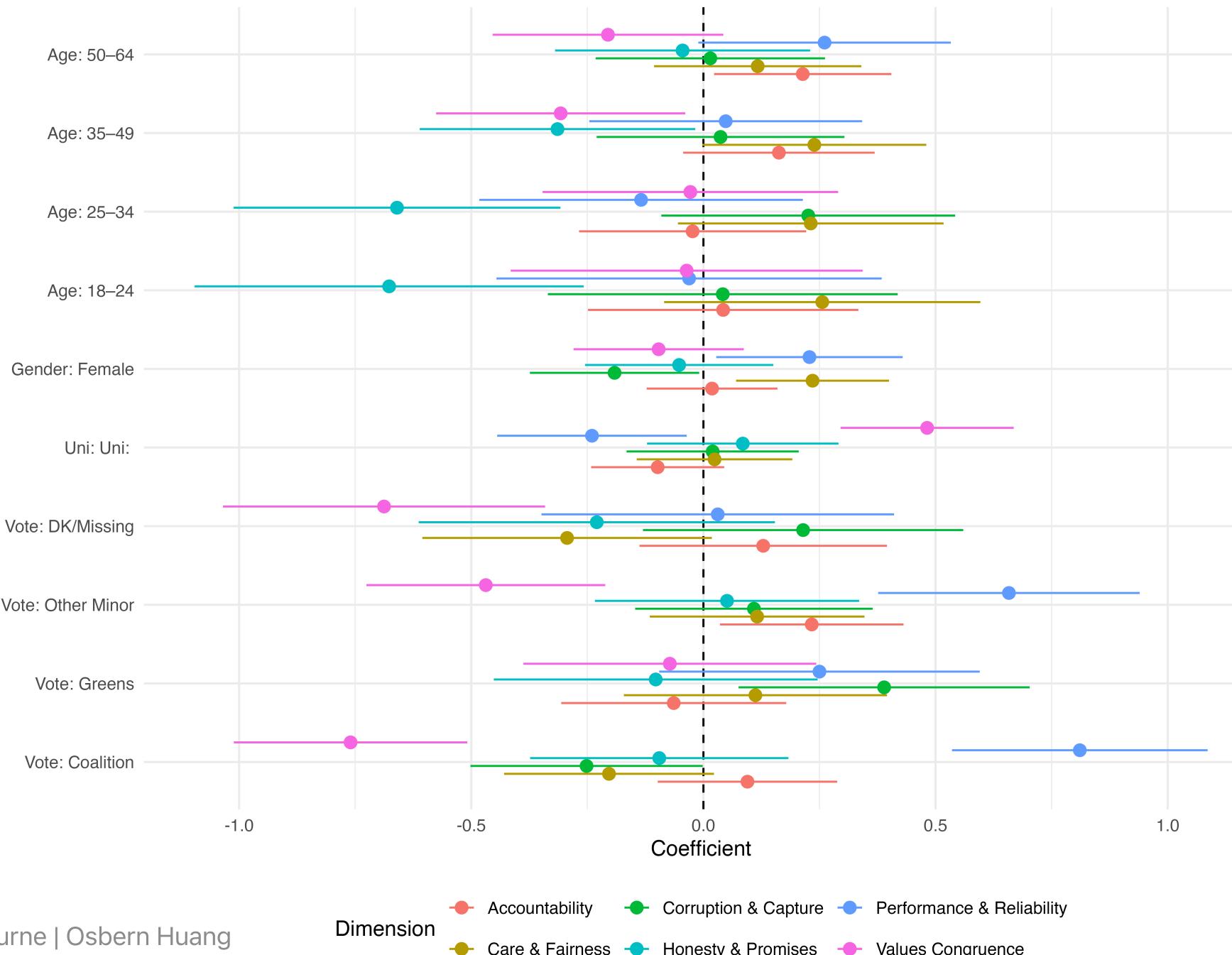
## Distrust in Agency



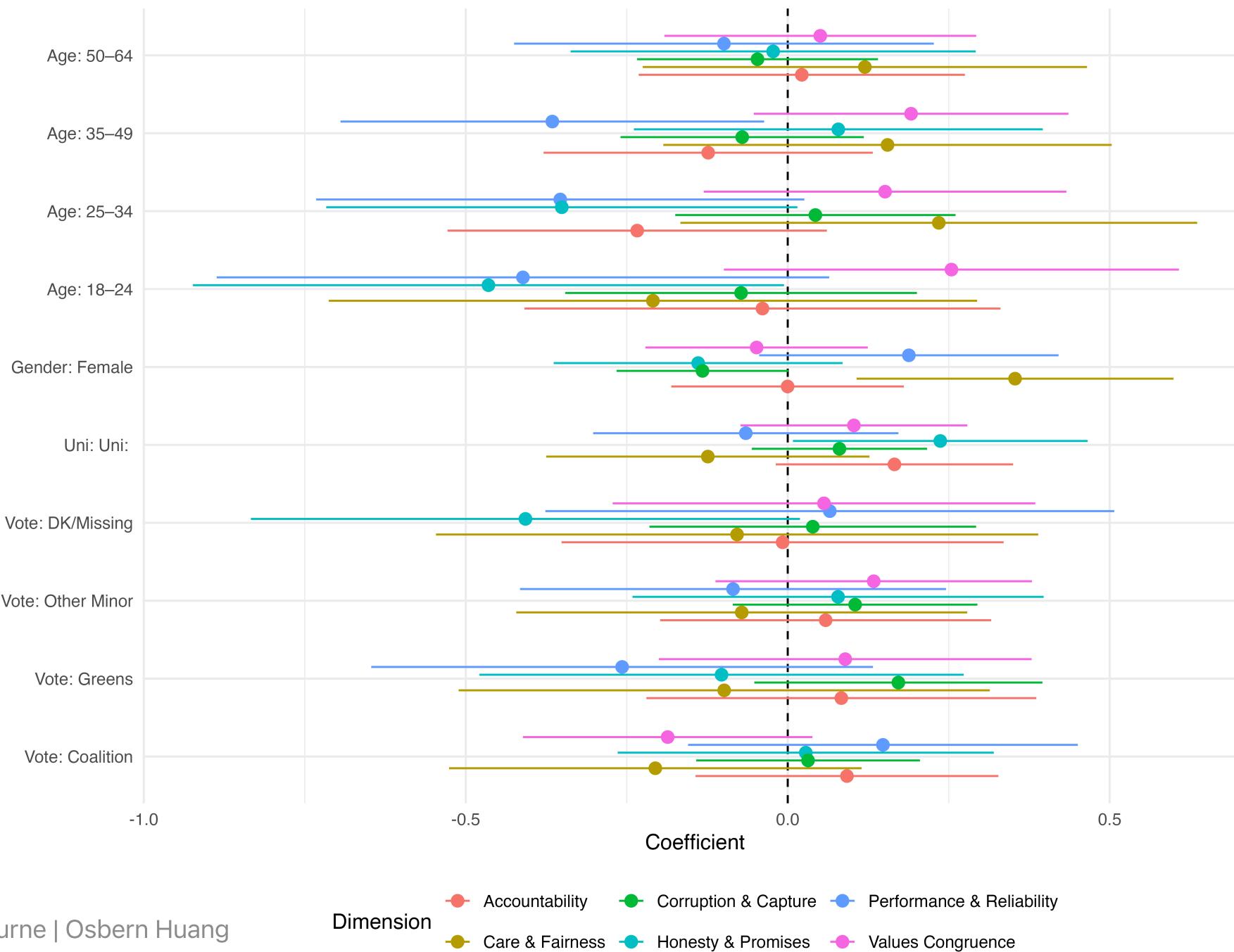
# Trust in Politician



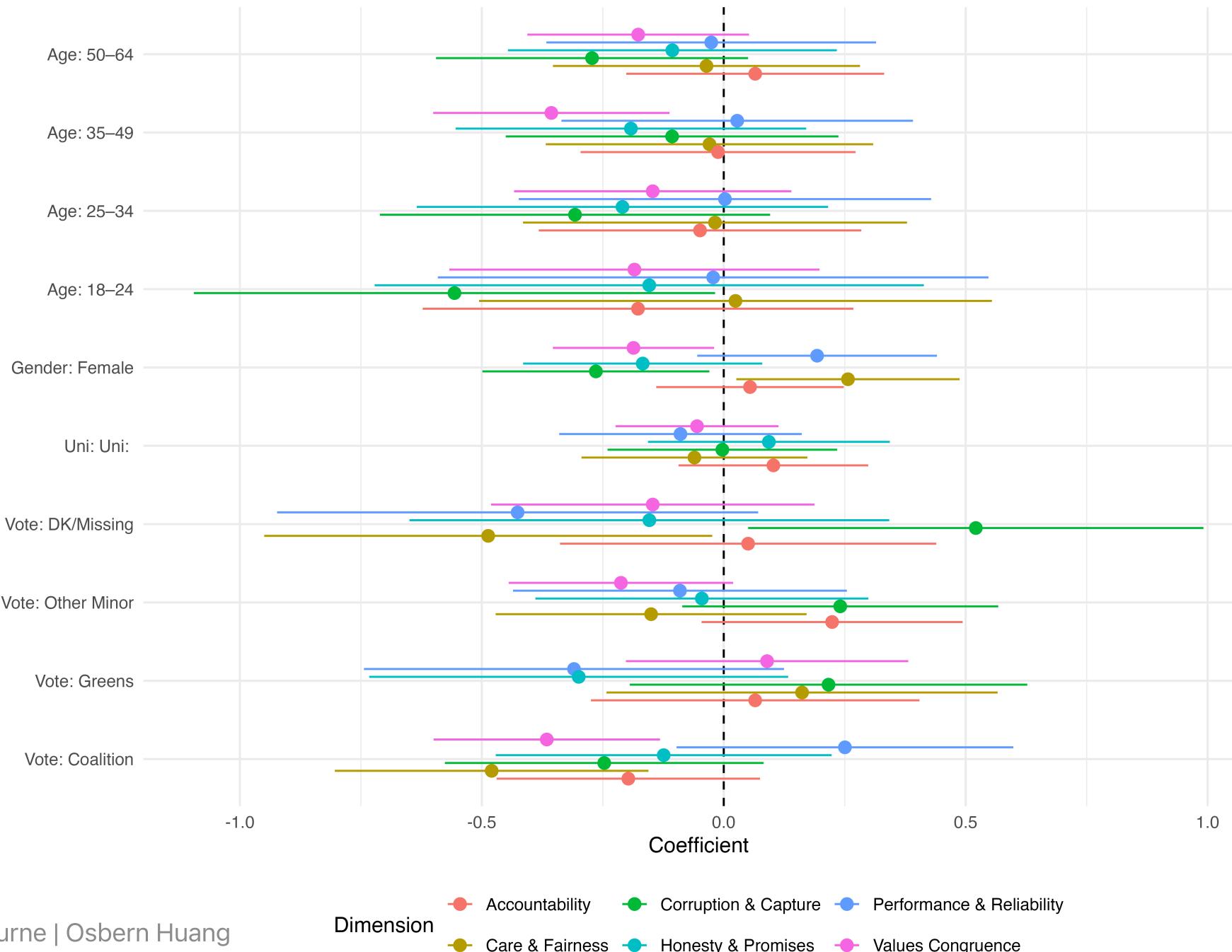
# Distrust in Politician



# Trust in Agency



# Distrust in Agency



# How People Trusts & Distrusts Politicians vs Agencies? (1)

- Agencies vs Politicians:
  - Performance & reliability drives trust in agencies more than in politicians.
  - Distrust in politicians is more tightly linked to corruption, dishonesty, and broken promises.
- Younger Australians (18–34) tend to be significantly more critical:
  - Higher concern about corruption and performance in politicians.
  - Greater scepticism about agency care and fairness.

## How People Trusts & Distrusts Politicians vs Agencies? (2)

- Gender differences are modest but persistent:
  - Women slightly more concerned with care, fairness, and accountability, especially in agencies.
- Partisan identity predicts directional trust:
  - Coalition identifiers show elevated trust in politicians from performance & values congruence.
  - Greens voters show greater distrust from honesty and capture perspectives.
- If DK/Missing voters serve as a reference, then all other political alignments diverge sharply: trust is deeply entangled with partisan belonging.

## Implications for Trust Measurement

- Need to expand beyond ABI
- Include fairness, duty, promise-keeping
- Actor-specific trust measurement recommended
- Open-ended responses essential for instrument validation

## Implications for Democratic Practice

- Citizens value honesty and community-first motives
- Improving public service delivery can raise agency trust
- Addressing political integrity concerns crucial for rebuilding trust

# Conclusion

1. Trust and Distrust: Not just different sides of the same coin
2. Trust in Politician: More than ABI
  - Value/partisanship: How to harness?
3. Demographical differences of trust drivers

# Thanks.

Comments and questions welcome.

# Scoring Prompt:

```
prompt = f"""
TASK:
You are a political scientist coding qualitative survey responses from a CATI survey in Australia.
Each response explains WHY a respondent trusts or distrusts a particular politician or government agency.

We have identified the following higher-order dimensions of trust/distrust drivers:
{dim_desc}

For EACH dimension, you must assign a score between 0.00 and 4.00 (two decimal places), where:
- 4.00 = the response is extremely about this dimension,
- 3.xx = mostly about this dimension,
- 2.xx = somewhat about this dimension,
- 1.xx = slightly about this dimension,
- 0.00 = not at all about this dimension.

Important:
- The same response can score highly on multiple dimensions.
- Both trust and distrust reasons are coded on the SAME dimensions. For example, if someone complains about poor performance, this is still strongly about the 'Performance & competence' dimension, just in a negative direction.
- Do NOT infer content that is not mentioned. If a dimension is not clearly present, score it near 0.00.

RESPONSE TEXT:
\"\"\"{response_text}\"\"\"

OUTPUT FORMAT:
Return ONLY valid JSON with this structure:

{{ "scores": [
    {{ "name": "dimension name 1", "score": 0.00 },
     { "name": "dimension name 2", "score": 0.00 },
     ...
   ],
   "justification": "2-5 sentence explanation summarising how the response reflects each dimension."
}]

Use exactly the same dimension names as listed above.
""""
```

Aspect	PCA	UMAP
Goal	Maximise explained variance (global structure)	Preserve local neighbourhoods (manifold structure)
Projection Type	Linear	Non-linear
Interpretability	PC1 and PC2 explain % of total variance	Axes are not meaningful, only distances matter
Use Case Fit	Good for global overview	Best for <b>visualising clusters</b> from embeddings
Dimensional Sensitivity	May underrepresent curved or disjoint structure	More faithful to embedding geometry

PCA confirms that our semantic embeddings capture broad structure across question types.

UMAP reveals fine-grained subgroupings — ideal for pairing with unsupervised clustering and LLM cluster labeling.

# More Results

- Human vs. AI induction

# We already have this from human coders (including myself)

Dimension	Core Meaning	Coding Logic	Sub-Dimensions (Rationale)
1. Reliability	Whether the politician/agency can be counted on to do what they say.	Use when respondents emphasise <b>broken promises</b> , unreliability, inconsistency, or poor past track record.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Breaks promises / doesn't follow through.</li> <li>• Generally unreliable.</li> <li>• Mentions of past behaviour or history showing inconsistency.</li> </ul>
2. Honesty & Integrity	Truthfulness, ethical standards, moral character.	Use when comments relate to <b>lying</b> , corruption, unethical behaviour, or questionable personal character.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lies / dishonest behaviour.</li> <li>• Negative character traits (duplicitous, disloyal).</li> <li>• Corruption or corrupt behaviour.</li> <li>• Lack of integrity (with or without details).</li> </ul>
3. Benevolence (Duty / Service Orientation)	Acting in the public interest and treating people fairly.	Use when respondents mention <b>self-interest</b> , fairness, principled behaviour, respect, or how they treat people.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Puts personal or political interest above community.</li> <li>• Acts in ways contrary to "doing the right thing".</li> <li>• Treats people badly / disrespectfully.</li> <li>• Unfair treatment of self or others.</li> </ul>
4. Competence	Ability to perform duties effectively and deliver outcomes.	Use when respondents describe <b>poor performance</b> , incompetence, or harmful outcomes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor performance affecting respondent personally.</li> <li>• Poor performance affecting the broader community.</li> <li>• Poor performance without specifying impact.</li> </ul>
5. Transparency	Openness, clarity of motives, visibility of actions.	Use when comments reference <b>secrecy</b> , hidden agendas, lack of openness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not transparent or open.</li> <li>• Has hidden motives / secret agenda.</li> </ul>
6. Responsiveness	Willingness to listen, assist, and engage with citizens.	Use when respondents focus on whether the actor <b>helps</b> , <b>listens</b> , or meets their needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not help (self or others).</li> <li>• Fails to meet needs / unresponsive.</li> </ul>
7. Accountability	Responsibility-taking, rule-following, consequences for actions.	Use when respondents mention <b>rule-breaking</b> , refusal to take responsibility, or abuses of power.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acts illegally or against rules.</li> <li>• Avoids responsibility / won't own mistakes.</li> <li>• Abuse of power / lack of recourse.</li> <li>• Lack of oversight/regulation.</li> </ul>
8. Alignment / Congruence / Connection	Shared values, policy agreement, familiarity, personal experience.	Use when respondents comment on <b>value congruence</b> , familiarity, or direct experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disagreement with values or policies.</li> <li>• Knowing them or knowing someone who knows them.</li> <li>• Personal negative or positive experience (for trust/distrust).</li> </ul>