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Trust in government and policies of the COVID-19 pandemic: the before and after comparison in the European sample

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Abstract

This research explores the relationship between COVID-19 policies and mortality rates and the level of trust in government in Europe. This study looks at the stringency of measures, as well as their effectiveness as shown through high or low mortality rates, to see if there is a relationship between those factors and increases or decreases in trust in 2020. The Eurobarometer is the dataset for trust in government, with a focus on the data from Summer 2020, the first Eurobarometer after COVID-19 began. The Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center was used for cumulative mortality, and Shvetsova et al., 2022 provided the data on Protective Policy Index, showing policy stringency. Trust increased in the average of the sample in the summer of 2020. Trust most increased in countries with stringent policies (PPI >0.6 on April 24, 2020), and with high mortality (> 10/100k deaths by May 1 2020). This showed that while stringent policies may be associated with a higher increase in trust, the effectiveness of those policies (which would lead to lower mortality rates) was not the main factor behind why those policies led to an increase in trust. Countries with stringent policies and either high or low mortality had a larger increase in trust than countries with non-stringent policies and high or low mortality.

1. Introduction

COVID-19 was a worldwide pandemic, forcing countries to respond quickly, in order to control the pandemic's spread and effect. However, it is not yet clear how governments' responses had an effect on people's perception of their government. As this was a global experience, nearly every citizen dealt with COVID-19 and the responding government policies, leading to the question on how this affected trust in governments around the world.

Some studies have indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a decrease in trust in government (Cohen 2021; Saka 2021; Jorgensen et al 2022; Newport 2022). As a result, people are less likely to trust public health authority and follow public health guidance, as well as the government overall. A recent study found that there is a correlation between less trust in government and more COVID-19 infections (Newport 2022). A Gallup poll from 2021 on Americans' trust in the government found the lowest ever numbers, with 39% saying they trust the government to handle domestic and international affairs (Newport 2022). In general, young people who live through epidemics are less likely to trust the government and approve of its performance (Saka, 2021). People misdirect their contempt towards the situation of the pandemic into their anger towards government and public health guidance which affects political stability (Jorgensen, 2022). This will potentially have long term implications for how well public health institutions can function, if people are unwilling to put their trust into these institutions and follow proper guidelines. People with low trust in government in multiple countries have protested against these measures, and defied orders such as social distancing.

In August of 2020, far-right extremists attempted to storm the German parliament building during a protest about the country's pandemic restrictions (Jordans 2020). The protest was in opposition to government measures intended to stop the spread of COVID-19, such as mask wearing (Jordans 2020). The protests drew a crowd of 38,000 (Jordans 2020). The protest seemed to go further than just opposition to COVID-19 measures, with one attendee that was interviewed calling for the current political system to be abolished (Jordans 2020). An earlier protest in Berlin was estimated to have drawn a crowd of 17,000, with people chanting about how they were being robbed of their freedoms (Moulson, 2020).

In London, several thousand people marched in protest of COVID-19 restrictions in April 2021 (Reuters 2021a). The event was organized by “Unite for Freedom,” and protesters showed their opposition to vaccinations, masks, and “health passports" (Reuters 2021a). Protestors in the United Kingdom have been arrested during anti-lockdown protests, as mass gatherings defied coronavirus policies (Reuters 2021b). The Netherlands also saw anti-COVID-19 measure protests, with some lighting fires and defacing property (Pruitt-Young 2021). These anti-COVID-19 measure protests continued throughout other European countries as well (Pruitt-Young 2021). 35,000 demonstrated in Vienna and Brussels in November 2021 (Pruitt-Young 2021). Croatia and Italy also saw anti-COVID measures demonstrations (Pruitt-Young 2021).

These examples highlight dissatisfaction with government performance in relation to common COVID-19 measures. People’s trust in government has clearly been impacted, however, it is not clear to what extent. It is unclear if these examples prove a wider pattern of distrust in government as these movements seem tied to a growing minority of far-rightists (Jordans 2020). However, these views still became more prominent during COVID-19. These protests were extremely visible, and at the least created the perception of dissatisfaction over COVID-19 measures.

However, there is also the chance for the pandemic to increase the amount of trust people have in government. If people believe that the government enacted proper guidelines and worked to help the general public, reducing the COVID-19 mortality rate compared to other countries, that could possibly increase people’s confidence in government institutions. Therefore, the type and extent of policy enacted during COVID-19 is likely to impact people’s trust in government.

This is important to study as COVID-19 was a worldwide event that had wide ranging effects across every country. The effects of this time period are not fully known yet. COVID-19

had a large scale impact on political, economic, and social life**.** Considering the criticism of how governments handled the pandemic, it is important to ask how trust has been impacted**.** Comparing different policies between countries, and the trust levels of each before and after COVID-19, can possibly show how different types of COVID-19 interventions affected public opinion. This paper aims to achieve this through comparing three different datasets. The Eurobarometer survey, carried out multiple times a year in European countries, provides a country by country overview on if citizens tend to trust or tend to distrust their country. Total average Protective Policy Index (PPI), as recorded by Shvetsova et al, 2022, provides a coding of how stringent COVID-19 measures were country by country. Finally, data by Johns Hopkins provides information on cumulative deaths in order to assess the amount of burden COVID-19 was on each country, showing the need for stringent policy and the amount citizens were affected by the pandemic.

2. Literature Review

Since the pandemic, researchers have explored the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and government. In addition, there is also literature on pandemics and government available prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which can still provide insight into the political effects of a pandemic. Literature on large scale events that required a large government response may also be relevant.

Studies conducted prior to COVID-19, have made connections between trust in government and pandemics around the world. One such analysis, by Aksoy, Eichengreen, and Saka (2020) linked data on political trust in Gallup World Polls from 2006-2018 to incidences of epidemics. This study found that experience with an epidemic between ages 18-25 led to less confidence in political leaders, governments, and elections (Aksoy, Eichengreen, and Saka,

2020). This group was 5.1% less likely to have confidence in national governments (Aksoy, Eichengreen, and Saka 2020).

A study by Bollyky et al., correlated a fall in trust and the COVID-19 pandemic in America (Newport 2022). On the other hand, the same study found an association between higher levels of trust in government during the pandemic and lower infection rates and higher vaccination rates. This may show how trust may have influenced the pandemic, allowing for better control of the situation. It may also show how a better controlled situation increased trust. Trust does not necessarily always fall or increase with the pandemic, it is dependent on the specific conditions and effectiveness of the response.

Another study, by Adamecz-Völgyi and Szabó-Morvai (2021) also found a correlation between confidence in public institutions and deaths due to COVID-19. There was an association between more confidence in public institutions and fewer predicted deaths, suggesting that people were more willing to cooperate with measures which made that more effective.

According to Gallup, 2021 was the year with the lowest number of Americans (39%) expressing trust in the federal government to handle domestic at foreign affairs (Newport 2022). According to the Michigan Public Policy Survey, 23% of local officials in the state felt there was a “total breakdown of democracy at the federal level” in 2021, up 7% from the year before (MPPS 2021). This may be related to the level the COVID-19 pandemic reached in the United States. Although other factors also may have contributed to lower levels of trust (such as change in the presidency, the January insurrection etc.).

The Wellcome Global Monitor (2021), a global survey on science, found an increase in how much people said they trusted scientists between 2018 and 2020. The amount of people saying they trust science and scientists “a lot” rose by 9% (p. 3). This survey also found a slight

increase in the trust people had in doctors and nurses, charity workers, journalists, and national governments in the same time period. Globally, there was an increase of 3% of people saying they trusted their national government "a lot" (p. 25). An increase in trust in science may be connected to COVID-19, as that is the main reason scientists were in the public eye.

There is also literature on large catastrophes and trust, showing how large traumatic situations that the whole of a country's population experiences impacts how they view their government. For example, trust in the national government in Japan deteriorated following the Fukushima nuclear power plant disaster in 2011 (Ando 2018). This was especially due to the confusion caused by government evacuation and safety measures after the incident (Ando 2018). People did not understand the government's orders, and felt misled on what was safe or not, such as when the values for acceptable radioactive material in food was deemed to be set at an unsafe level (Ando 2018).

People living in areas of the United States impacted by Hurricane Katrina showed low levels of trust in government in the aftermath when compared to the general population (Nicholls and Picou 2012). They are 15% more likely to have no trust in the government than the general population (Nicholls and Picou 2012). Poor government performance during and in the hurricane aftermath (such as evacuation plans, providing support, rebuilding communities) seemed to have affected how much people trusted the government (Nicholls and Picou 2012).

This paper traces the levels of trust in government in the years following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic thus far. As COVID-19 was a large-scale event causing a large government response, looking at other disasters may reveal patterns that arise from similar situations. Overall, trust seems to decline when government orders are confusing or ineffective.

Government trust levels during COVID-19 may correlate with how effective control measures were.

3. Methods

This paper will use public opinion data from the Eurobarometer survey to compare people's attitudes toward their country. The countries involved in this study are the EU member states as well as the United Kingdom. Although the United Kingdom has left the EU, it still is included in Eurobarometer studies and has close ties to Europe. Candidate countries to the EU are also surveyed in the Eurobarometer, but as many have not been surveyed for the length of time included in this paper, they were not included.

The Eurobarometer provides an overview of people's trust in government. Comparing these indicators before and after COVID-19 will help to indicate the pandemic's effect. Overall, this paper will focus on the Eurobarometer question that asks whether or not people trust their national government and will compare the answers overall time in order to study the effects of the pandemic. The standard Eurobarometer is regularly carried out in the European Union and candidate countries in order to gauge public opinion. One such question gauges trust in each nation's government. This question is ""I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain media and institutions. For each of the following media and institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it. The (NATIONALITY) Government." This question was chosen as it directly asks people about their trust in government and records the answer over time which this paper aims to analyze. The answers to this question is either tend to trust or tend not to trust, with "don't know" as an unspoken third option. The answer is recorded in the percentage of people who give each answer. The percentages of people falling into each category are divided by country and then is averaged into the EU overall. This paper

took this information and converted it into an Excel file for graphing, with the dates ranging from the Quarters in 2004 until 2023. This time period was chosen due to the availability of data for this specific question. The last Eurobarometer available at this time is currently from Autumn 2023. Line graphs comparing the percentage answering “tend to trust” among different samples of countries were produced in Excel.

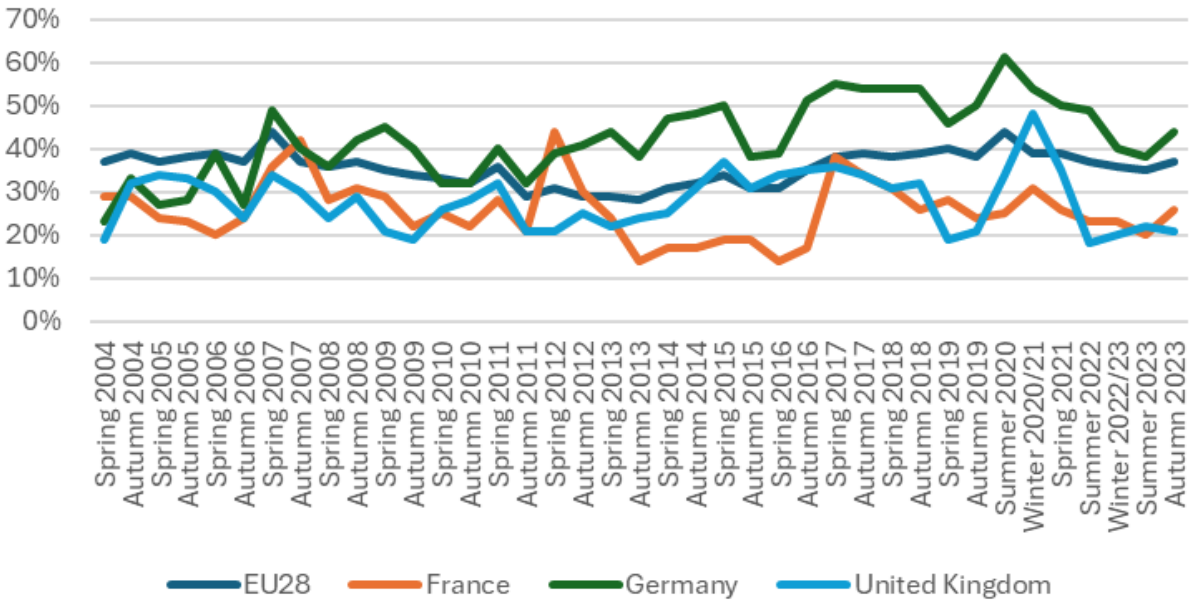
Different samples for each graph were chosen based on geographic location, as well as older vs. newer EU members, as a way to organize the data. This paper calculates averages for newer EU members, older ones, and the EU overall (with the U.K. included). This is a way to compare countries with similar conditions and histories to each other, as a way to search for patterns as they have shared experiences.

In addition, this paper recorded information on each country’s COVID-19 response and the burden of COVID-19 each dealt with. It is important to consider these when attempting to pinpoint the reason COVID-19 had an effect on changing trust levels. This information was separated into tables, recording total average PPI, from Shvetsova et al. 2022. Cumulative deaths per 100,000 people was taken from Johns Hopkins. This was recorded by country, based on what data was available for countries in the Eurobarometer sample.

4. Analysis

The below figures compare different samples of European countries based on region. Three countries are chosen per region and compared to the overall EU28 average trust. Additionally older against newer EU members are compared. The averages for “old” and “new” EU countries were also constructed and compared against the overall average.

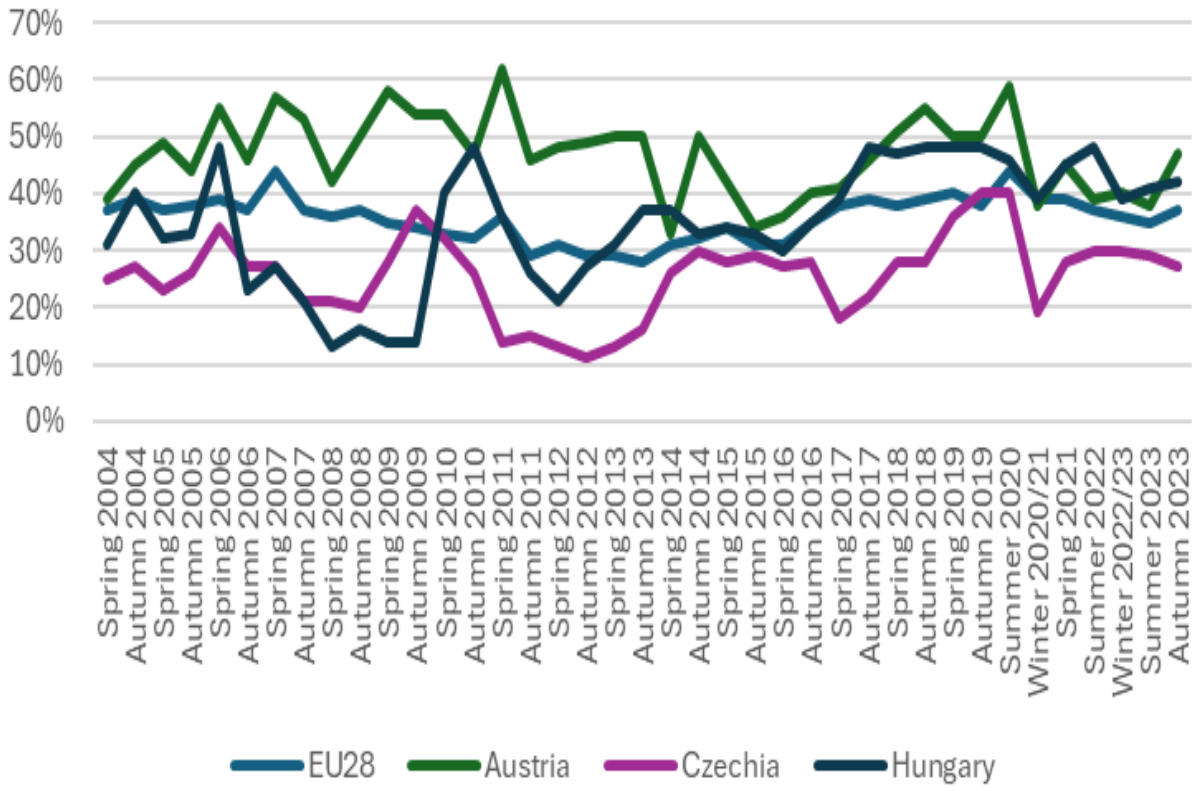
Figure 1. Cross-national average percentage responding positively to "Tend to trust" in 3 Western European countries and EU28 Average.



Source: Standard Eurobarometer 61-100, calculations by author.

Figure 1 shows a sample of Western European countries against the EU overall average. Included are France (orange), Germany (green), the United Kingdom (light blue). The dark blue line represents the EU28 average. The United Kingdom had a spike during the pandemic era, increasing in Summer 2020 and continuing that increase into the Winter 2020/2021 sample, before going back down. The U.K. level is below the overall EU average during and after the pandemic, except for the brief spike upwards. France and Germany show more stability in the level of trust when compared to the United Kingdom and past trends, but also have increases around the same time. The U.K.'s spike is the largest in this sample. The "EU28" amount represented here and in other charts is the calculated average of each country's percent reporting that they tend to trust.

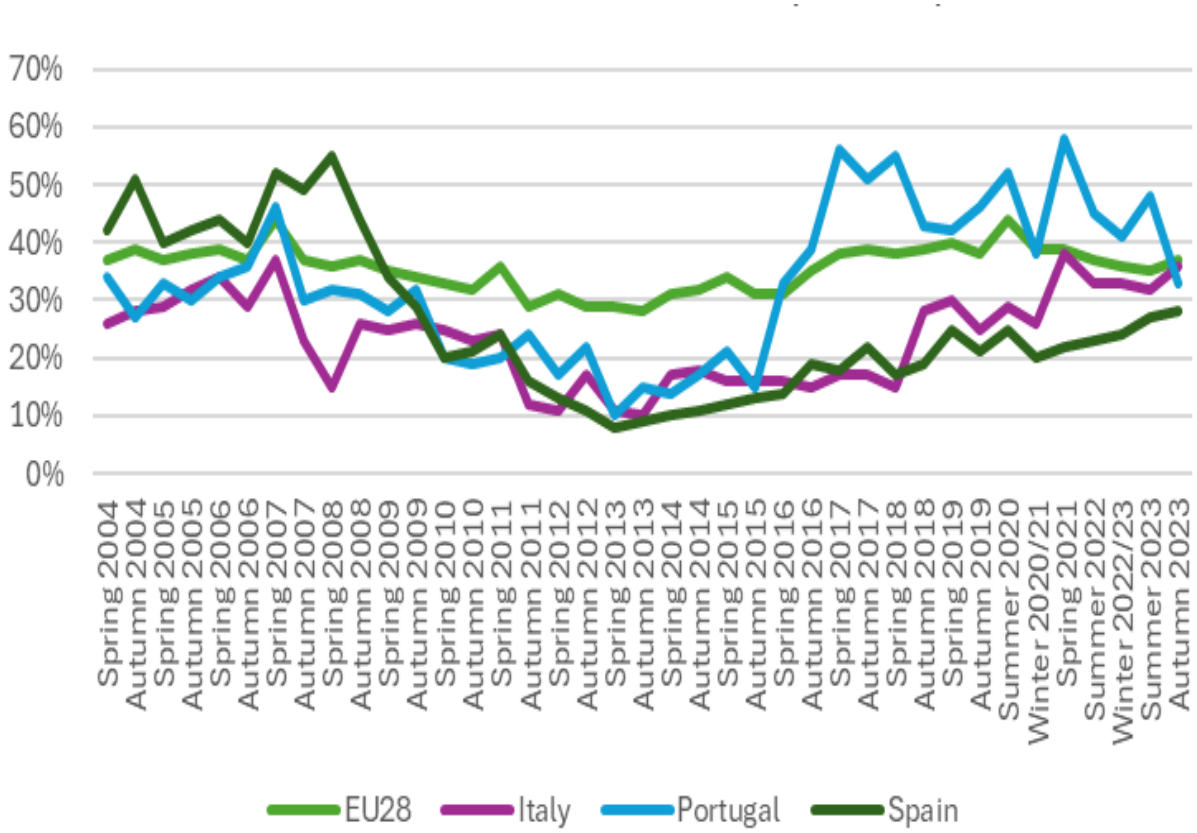
Figure 2. Cross-national average percentage responding positively to "Tend to trust" in 3 Central European countries and EU28 average.



Source: Standard Eurobarometer 61-100, calculations by author.

Figure 2 shows a sample of Central European countries against the EU average. Included are Austria (green), the Czech Republic (purple), Hungary (dark blue), and the EU28 average (light blue). Looking at central Europe, Austria does have a peak in the Summer of 2020, but then falls back down to similar levels compared to a few years prior to the pandemic. Hungary lost trust between Autumn 2019 and Summer 2020. The Czech Republic does not have an increase between Autumn 2019 and Summer 2020 and trust levels fall after that.

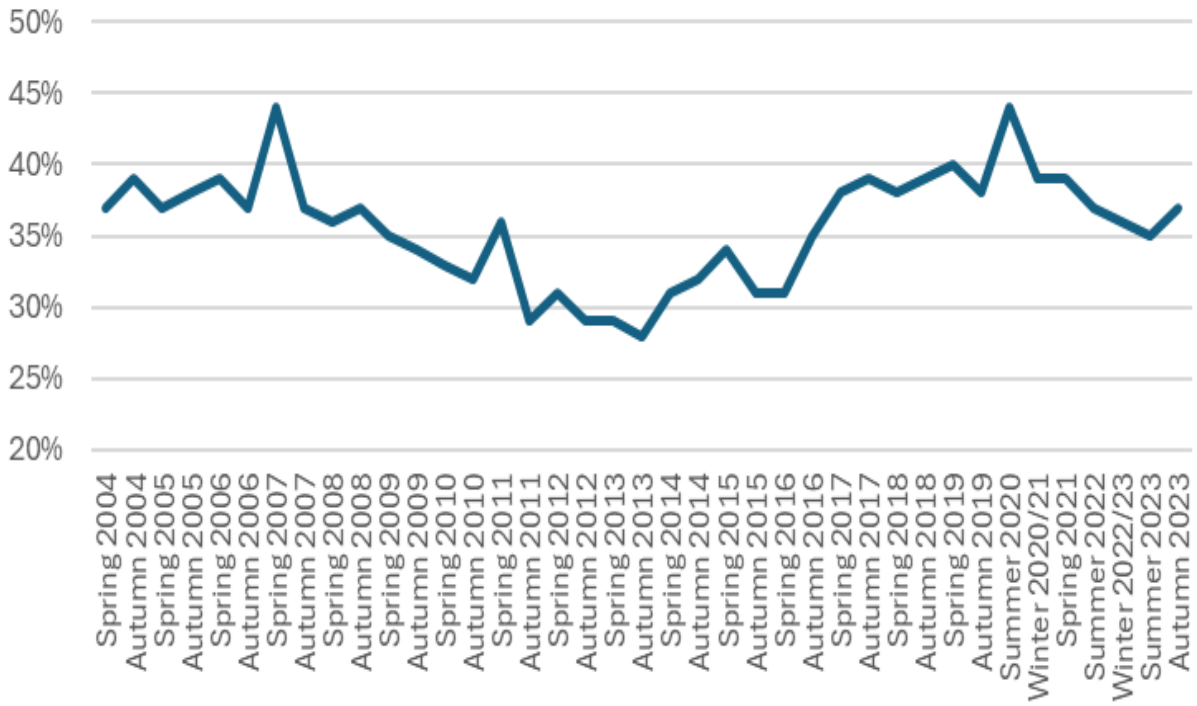
Figure 3. Cross-national average percentage responding positively to "Tend to trust" in 3 Southern European countries and EU28 average.



Source: Standard Eurobarometer 61-100, calculations by author.

Figure 3 shows a sample of Southern European Countries against the EU 28 average. Included are Italy (purple), Portugal (blue), Spain (dark green), against the EU28 average (light green). Portugal shows more change in trust than Italy or Spain, with all countries having an increase between Autumn 2019 and Summer 2020.

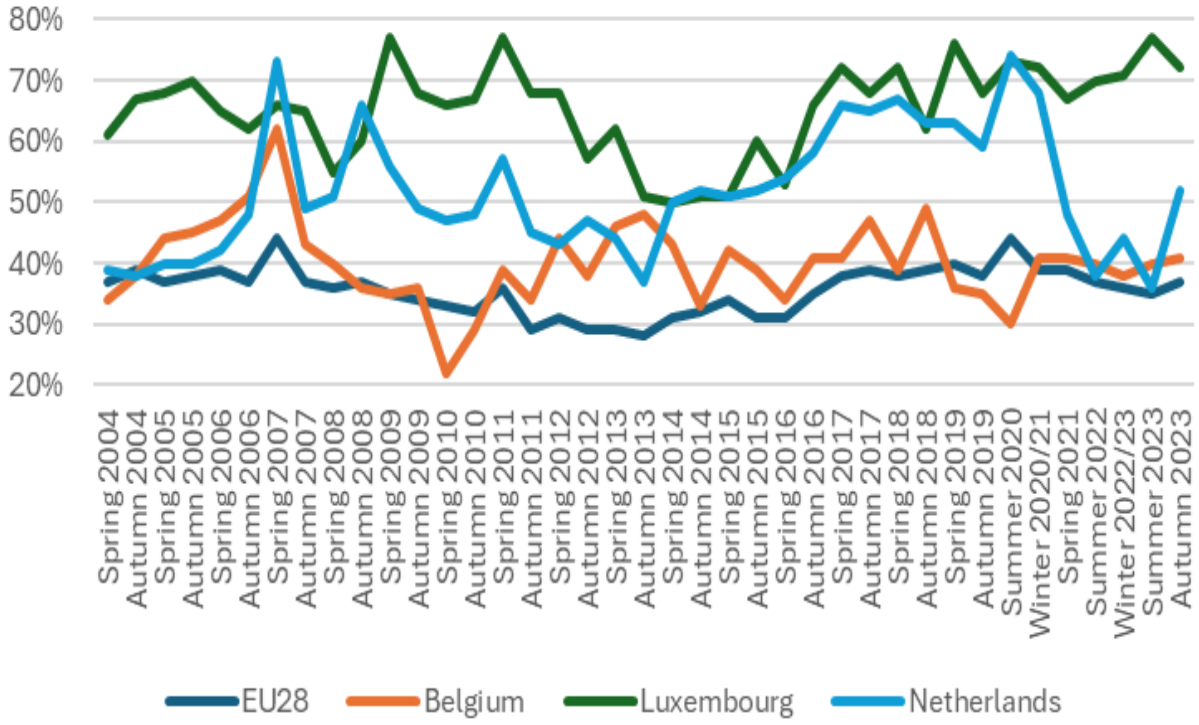
Figure 4. Percentage responding positively to "Tend to trust" in the average of EU28 countries.



Source: Standard Eurobarometer 61-100, calculations by author.

This graph represents the average of each countries' trust levels. This was calculated by averaging the 'tend to trust' percent for each country. When each country's trust level is given equal weight, the increase is 6% average. This shows a slight spike, but afterwards the numbers return to what they were around pre pandemic. Looking back all the way to 2004 shows what trends have occurred before. Figure 4 shows that similarly sized spikes have occurred in the past. The average trust level in Summer 2020 is one of the highest ever average trust levels since 2004. In Summer of 2020 the trust level reached 44%. The average trust was only ever that high at 44% in Spring 2007. It is notable that this was one of the highest ever trust levels when all the countries are put together.

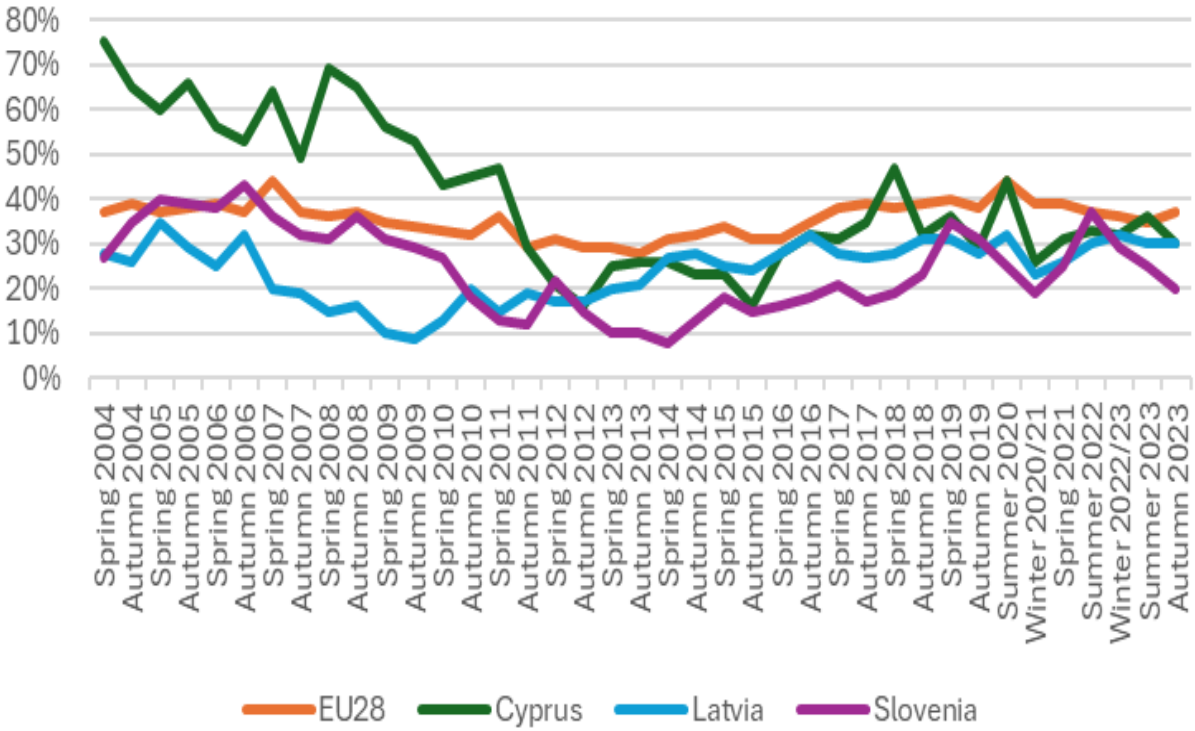
Figure 5. Percentage responding positively to "Tend to trust" in 3 Original EU members and the average of EU28 countries.



Source: Standard Eurobarometer 61-100, calculations by author.

Figure 5 shows a sample of countries that originally made up the EU. This sample includes Belgium (orange), Luxembourg (green), Netherlands (light blue), and the EU28 average (dark blue). In this example, trust does seem to take a notable fall in 2021 in the Netherlands but has an initial increase between Autumn 2019 and Summer 2020. However, this does not show in the other countries included. Trust in Belgium falls between Autumn 2019 and Summer 2020, and then slightly recovers and remains stable. Belgium is one of only a few countries where trust falls in the initial pandemic period. In Luxembourg, trust initially increases between Autumn 2019 and Summer 2020.

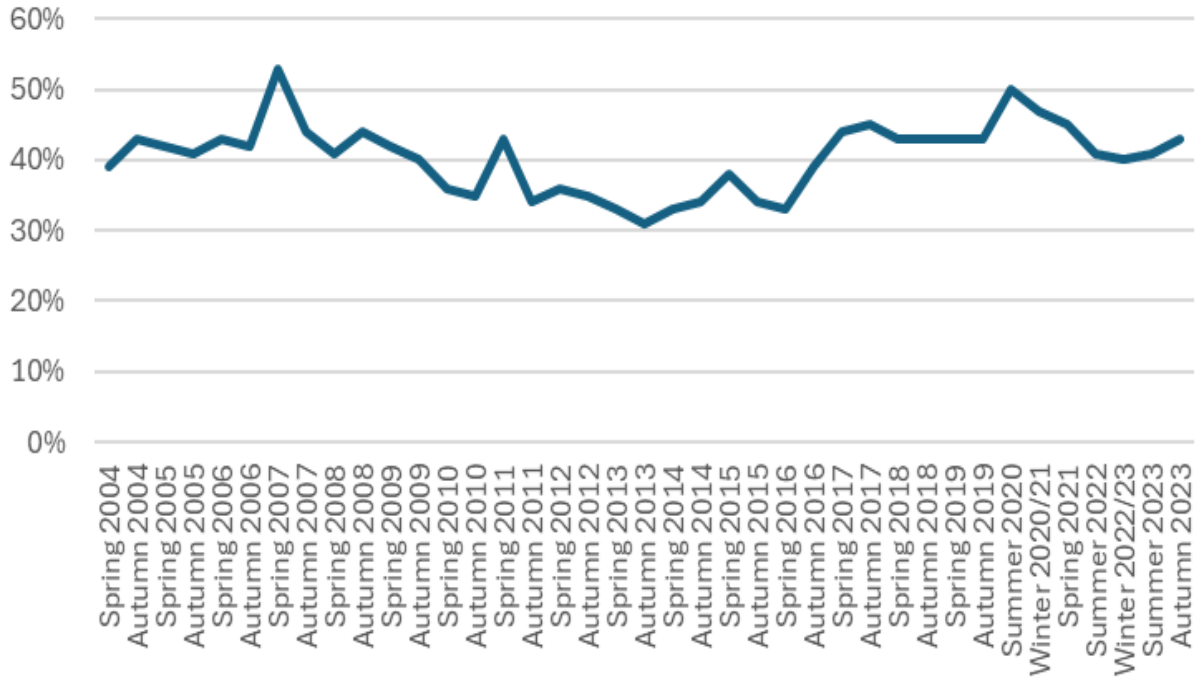
Figure 6. Percentage responding positively to "Tend to trust" in 3 "New" EU members and the average of EU28 countries.



Source: Standard Eurobarometer 61-100, calculations by author.

Figure 6 shows some of the more recently added members of the EU, Cyprus (green), Latvia (blue), and Slovenia (purple) against the EU28 (orange). In this example, Slovenia has a decrease in trust in Summer 2020, which is notable as most countries increased trust. Cyprus has a spike of 15%. Latvia has a smaller increase of 4%. Overall, these countries have a lower level of trust in government than the older members of the EU.

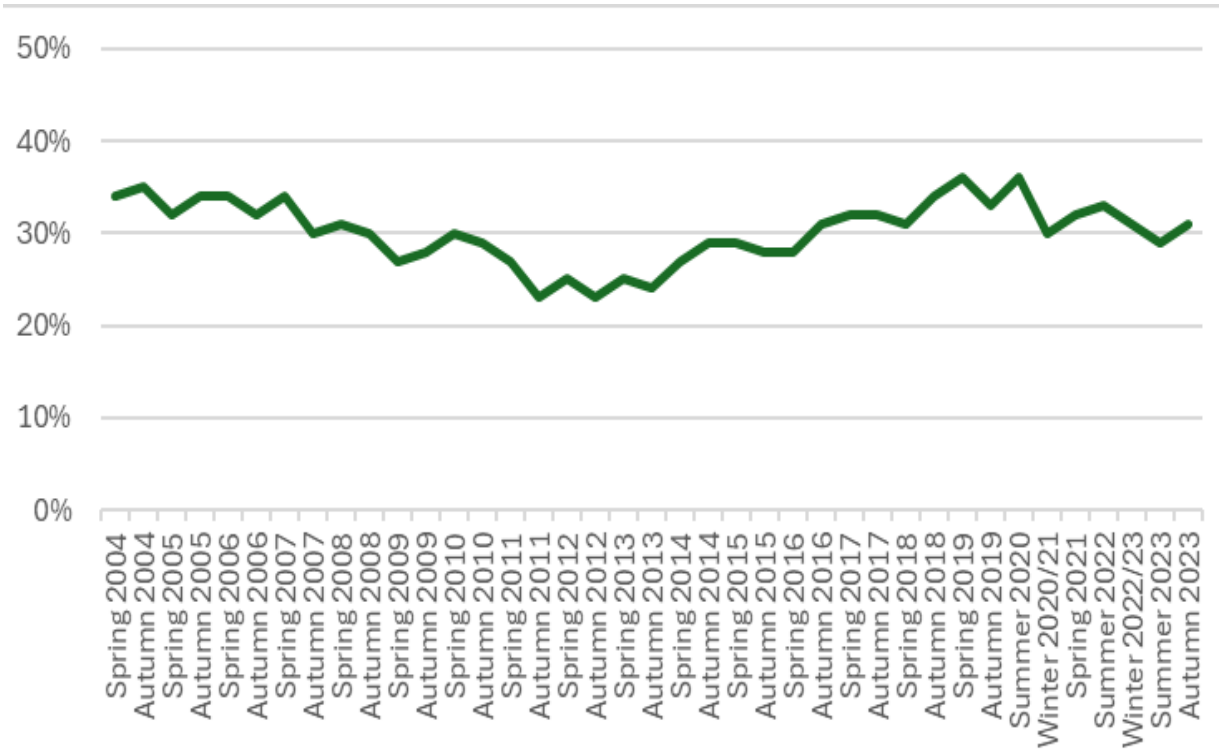
Figure 7. Cross-national average percentage responding positively to "Tend to trust" in 15 "Old" EU member states



Source: Standard Eurobarometer 61-100, calculations by author.

Figure 7 shows the change in trust among the EU members pre-2004 expansion. There is an increase in Summer 2020 which starts to decrease in the Winter 2020/21 era. . This chart again does not show a lasting change when the three years before and after the start of the pandemic are compared although there is an initial increase in trust. (Note that the "Old EU" sample still includes the United Kingdom).

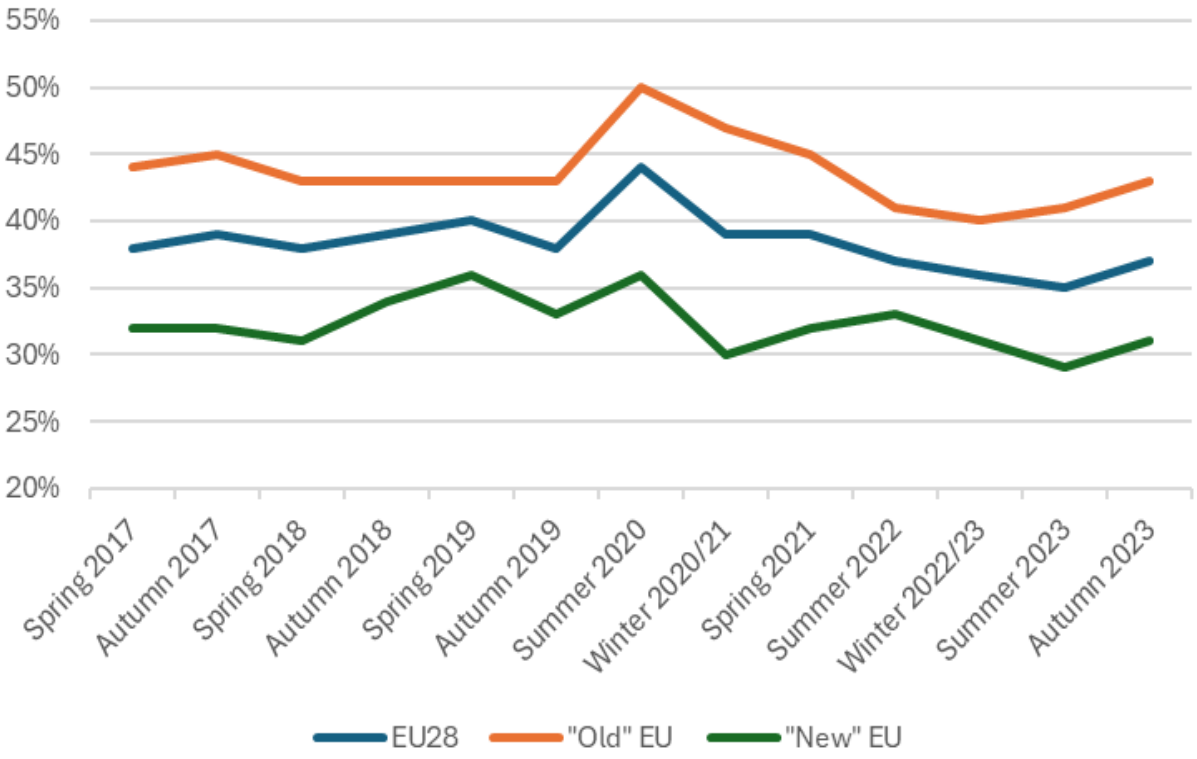
Figure 8. Cross-national average percentage responding positively to "Tend to trust", in 15 "New" EU member states



Source: Standard Eurobarometer 61-100, calculations by author.

This figure shows the average of the EU member states who were added after the 2004 expansion. These countries are mostly Central and Eastern European countries. The change in this chart around Autumn 2019 and Summer 2020 is smaller than in the "Old EU" graph, but there is still an increase at this time. Overall, the average trust is lower in this group than the "Old EU" group as well.

Figure 9. Cross-national average percentage responding positively to "Tend to trust" in "New" EU member states, "Old" EU member states, and the EU overall.



Source: Standard Eurobarometer 61-100, calculations by author.

Figure 9 compares the averages of the old (orange), new (green) and EU overall (blue) from 2017 until 2023. Narrowing in on this time frame helps to show the differences in the years immediately before and after the pandemic. All follow the same general trend of increasing or decreasing at the same time. Overall, the "New" EU trendline has been lower than the older members. There is a larger decline after the initial bump in Summer 2020 in the "Old" EU, but it also has a higher initial increase.

Explanatory COVID-19 Variables

The effectiveness of pandemic measures may impact trust levels, along with how hard each country was hit by the pandemic. Comparing the different measures countries took, along

with their increase or decrease in trust, can help to show why there are differences. The different COVID-19 policies of countries are compared based on the Protective Policy Index (PPI), which measures how stringent public health policies were. This is based on categories consisting of border closures, school closures, social gathering limits, home-bound policies, medical isolation policies, closure/restriction of businesses and services, the introduction of state of emergency, and requiring personal protective equipment and physical distancing (Shvetsova et al 2022). The countries included are limited based on the available data for PPI.

Table 1. Total Average Protective Policy Index on April 24, 2020, by country.

Country	Total average PPI on April 24, 2020
Austria	0.60
Belgium	0.53
Croatia	0.78
Czech Republic	0.50
Denmark	0.63
Finland	0.75
France	0.55
Germany	0.74
Hungary	0.48
Ireland	0.73
Italy	0.54
Netherlands	0.43
Poland	0.75
Portugal	0.78
Romania	0.43
Slovenia	0.73

Spain	0.64
Sweden	0.10
United Kingdom	0.62

Source: Shvetsova et al 2022.

Table 2. Total Average Protective Policy Index on April 24, 2020, Countries with stringent measures (above 0.60 PPI).

Countries with total average PPI above 0.60	Total average PPI on April 24, 2020
Austria	0.60
Croatia	0.78
Denmark	0.63
Finland	0.75
Germany	0.74
Ireland	0.73
Poland	0.75
Portugal	0.78
Slovenia	0.73
Spain	0.64
United Kingdom	0.62

Source: Shvetsova et al 2022.

Table 3. Total Average Protective Policy Index on April 24, 2020, Countries with less stringent measures (below 0.60 PPI).

Countries with total average PPI below 0.60	Total average PPI on April 24, 2020
Belgium	0.53
Czech Republic	0.50
France	0.56

Hungary	0.48
Italy	0.54
Netherlands	0.43
Romania	0.43
Sweden	0.10

Source: Shvetsova et al 2022.

Table 4. Total Average Protective Policy Index on April 24, 2020, "Old" EU members.

"Old" EU Countries	Total Average PPI
Austria	0.60
Belgium	0.53
Denmark	0.63
Finland	0.75
France	0.55
Germany	0.74
Ireland	0.73
Italy	0.54
Netherlands	0.43
Portugal	0.78
Spain	0.64
United Kingdom	0.62

Source: Shvetsova et al 2022.

Table 4 shows the older EU member states and their total average PPI level, breaking up the countries this way can help to show any patterns on how countries handled the pandemic based on similar economic and political environments.

Table 5. Total Average Protective Policy Index on April 24, 2020, "New" EU members.

"New" EU Countries	Total average PPI on April 24, 2020
Croatia	0.78
Czech Republic	0.5
Hungary	0.48
Poland	0.75
Romania	0.43
Slovenia	0.73

Source: Shvetsova et al 2022.

In this paper, total PPI will be compared as it was on April 24th, 2020, because relevant sources identify that as the date after which some jurisdictions began reducing pandemic policy stringencies (Shvetsova et al., 2022). It is represented on a scale of 0 to 1, with a higher number indicating more strict measures. Table 1 shows all the European countries this data was available for. Tables 2 and 3 splits the data based on who was above or below 0.6 (a rough midpoint between the values represented). Tables 4 and 5 split the values based on older and newer EU members. Of the countries listed, Sweden is the least strict at 0.1. This PPI seems to be an outlier when compared to the other European countries. The next lowest is the Netherlands at 0.425. The highest is Croatia and Portugal at 0.775. Other than Sweden, all other countries are contained in that moderate range. So, most countries maintained a moderate amount of strictness when it came to implementing COVID-19 measures. This has the potential to have an effect on trust based on how effective the measures actually are, and how people feel about stringent measures and the resulting limitations.

Next, exploring how much each country was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic is important. This will be represented by looking at cumulative deaths per 100,000 people by each

country. Representing the deaths by 100,00 makes the data more comparable between countries with different population sizes. This data also shows the demand for stringent measures. This data was collected from Johns Hopkins, and deaths per 100,000 was calculated using population measures for 2020 from the World Bank.

Table 6. Cumulative Deaths per 100,000 people on May 1st 2020, by country.[1]

Country	Cumulative Deaths per 100k by May 1 2020
Austria	7.1
Belgium	67.0
Croatia	1.9
Czech Republic	2.2
Denmark	7.9
Finland	4.7
France	37.6
Germany	7.8
Hungary	3.3
Ireland	25.4
Italy	46.7
Netherlands	28.1
Poland	1.7
Portugal	9.8
Romania	3.9
Slovenia	4.4
Spain	52.5

[1] COVID-19 mortality data can be limited by testing availability and differing definitions of a COVID-19 death. This can lead to difficulties comparing mortality data on a global level. The dataset by Karlinsy and Kobak tracked the undercount of COVID-19 deaths by country. (Karlinsky and Kobak, 2021).

Sweden	25.6
United Kingdom	58.7

Source: Johns Hopkins, World Bank, calculations by author.

Table 7. Cumulative Deaths per 100,000 people on May 1st 2020, countries with rate below 10 per 100,000.

Country	Cumulative Deaths per 100k by May 1 2020 (Below 10 per 100,000)
Austria	7.1
Croatia	1.9
Czech Republic	2.2
Denmark	7.9
Finland	4.7
Hungary	3.3
Germany	7.8
Poland	1.7
Portugal	9.8
Romania	3.9
Slovenia	4.4

Source: Johns Hopkins, World Bank, calculations by author.

Table 8. Cumulative Deaths per 100,000 people on May 1st 2020, countries with rate above 10 per 100,000.

Country	Cumulative Deaths per 100k by May 1 2020 (above 10 per 100,000)
Belgium	67.0
France	37.6
Ireland	25.4

Italy	46.7
Netherlands	28.1
Spain	52.5
Sweden	25.6
United Kingdom	58.7

Source: Johns Hopkins, World Bank, calculations by author.

Tables 6-8 chart the cumulative deaths due to COVID-19 per 100,000 people, as they were on May 1 2020. This will help to compare how countries were impacted by COVID-19 at this time, with a proportional comparison. The amount of deaths each country was dealing with also shows the demand for stringent PPI measures, especially as the total average PPI and the cumulative deaths calculations are taken from around the same time. Using both together can help to show if countries were responding proportionally to the current COVID-19 situation, which could affect trust. The countries represented in the table were chosen based on what data was available for European countries. Lower cumulative deaths were seen in Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, and Poland. Poland had the lowest at 1.7 per 100,000 people. Belgium, France, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom were some of the countries with the highest rate of cumulative deaths. Belgium had the highest rate of deaths at 67 per 100,000 people.

Table 9. Comparison of the average change in people responding "tend to trust" from Spring 2014 and Autumn 2019, to the change in between Autumn 2019 and Spring 2020.

Country	Spring 14- Autumn 19 Average Change between Eurobarometers	Autumn 19- Summer 20 Change
Austria	+2	+9
Belgium	-1	-5
Croatia	0	+9
Czech Republic	+1	0

Denmark	+2	+15
Finland	0	+6
France	+1	+1
Germany	0	+11
Hungary	+1	-2
Ireland	+2	+9
Italy	+1	+4
Netherlands	+2	+15
Poland	+1	0
Portugal	+3	+6
Romania	+1	+4
Slovenia	+2	-6
Spain	+1	+4
Sweden	0	+6
United Kingdom	0	+13

Source: Eurobarometer 81-93 and calculations by author.

Table 9 charts change in trust between 2014 and 2019, and then the change that occurred in Autumn 2019 and Summer 2020. The countries represented here are the ones for which both PPI and cumulative death data was available. Comparing the averages before COVID-19, and then the change during COVID-19, can help to reveal any significant change. Change in trust is important as it is the main thing being studied to determine if COVID-19 policies had an effect on trust. Between these countries, there is a mix for how out of range the change in trust was between Autumn 2019 and Summer 2020, which encapsulates the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The first column shows the averaged change between eurobarometers from Spring

2014 until Autumn 2019. The average changes are between -1 and +3%. During these quarters there were larger changes, but this is what the averages were. The change in trust for Summer 2020 seen from Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, Italy, Poland, and Spain only vary within a few percentage points of the average change. Most of the changes also seem to be in the same direction (positive or negative) as the averages, except for a few exceptions. Significantly larger changes than the average occurred in Austria, Croatia, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Compared to the average, Austria had a change +7% above average and Germany +11%. The largest gap between the average change and change in Autumn 2019 and Summer 2020 was in Denmark, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom which were 13% above the average.

Table 10. Cross-section of Change in Trust, Total Average PPI, and Cumulative Deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic

Country	Change in Trust between Autumn 2019 and Summer 2020	Total Average PPI, on April 24 2020	Cumulative Deaths per 100k on May 1 2020
Austria	+9	0.60	7.1
Belgium	-5	0.525	67
Croatia	+9	0.775	1.9
Czech Republic	0	0.50	2.2
Denmark	+15	0.625	7.9
Finland	+7	0.75	4.7
France	+1	0.55	37.6
Germany	+11	0.739	7.8
Hungary	-2	0.475	3.3
Ireland	+9	0.725	25.4

Italy	+4	0.542	46.7
Netherlands	+15	0.425	28.1
Poland	0	0.75	1.7
Portugal	+6	0.775	9.8
Romania	+4	0.425	3.9
Slovenia	-6	0.725	4.4
Spain	+4	0.643	52.5
Sweden	+6	0.1	25.6
United Kingdom	+13	0.619	58.7

Source: Eurobarometers 92-93, Shvetsova et al., 2022, Johns Hopkins, calculations by author.

Table 10 compares change in trust from Autumn 2019 and Summer 2020, PPI, and cumulative deaths per 100k by country. Comparing these different markers against trust can show what effect each factor had. The following tables will go into comparing the different categories each country falls into.

Table 11. Countries by categories of COVID-19 spread and policy stringency by end of April 2020

	High mortality (> 10/100K by May 1 2020)	Low mortality (< 10/100k by May 1 2020)
Stringent policies, Av. Tot. PPI >0.6 on April 24, 2020	Ireland Spain United Kingdom	Austria Croatia Denmark Finland Germany Poland Portugal Slovenia
Non-stringent policies, Av. Tot. PPI <0.6 on April 24, 2020	Belgium France Italy Netherlands	Czech Republic Hungary Romania Sweden

	Spain	

Source: Johns Hopkins, Shvetsova et al., 2022.

Table 12. Average change of people responding "tend to trust" by countries by categories of COVID-19 spread and policy stringency by end of April 2020

	High mortality (> 10/100k deaths by May 1 2020)	Low mortality (< 10/100k deaths by May 1 2020)
Stringent policies, Av. Tot. PPI >0.6 on April 24, 2020	8.7	6.4 (9.6 for old EU)
Non-stringent policies, Av. Tot. PPI <0.6 on April 24, 2020	3.8	2

Source: Johns Hopkins, Shvetsova et al., 2022, calculations by author.

Trust increased more with stringent policy measures, both for countries with high and low mortality. Trust did increase in countries with non-stringent policies, but by less. Overall, there was the most increase in countries that had stringent policies but high mortality.[2] This shows that trust may be more dependent on countries adapting strict measures rather than on the actual mitigation of COVID-19. The average change was less for countries with stringent policies and low mortality compared to countries with stringent policies and high mortality, but there was a higher average change in trust in this category when original EU member states were isolated and newer members were not counted.[3]

[2] It is important to note that urban areas were more likely to experience a high concentration of COVID-19 cases and mortality. More people live in urban areas than rural areas in Europe, which also means they are more represented in the proportion of people surveyed through the Eurobarometer. So the urban bias in COVID-19 cases does not harm the association between trust and COVID-19 measures and mortality but may actually strengthen it, as despite higher cases and mortality rate, trust still increased in urban settings. (Eurostat, 2022). (Bignami-Van Assche, 2024).

[3] Political ideology and type of government also has impacted speed and strength of COVID-19 protective policies, in turn impacting level of trust. According to Shvetsova et al. (2020), democracies and liberal democracies responded "faster and stronger" to COVID-19. Further research may be necessary to delve into the impact of government type and trust during the COVID-19 era.

Countries that had increases in trust above the averages calculated in Table 12 were Austria, Croatia, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Two of these countries had high total average PPI and high mortality. Four had high total average PPI and low mortality. Only one (the Netherlands) had a PPI below 0.6 and high mortality. Overall, the countries above the average change in trust all had high total average PPI, and either high mortality or low mortality, with more countries were on the low mortality side.

A few countries lost trust between Autumn 2019 and Spring 2020, these countries were Belgium, Hungary, and Slovenia. Both Belgium and Hungary had non-stringent policies, although Belgium had high mortality and Hungary's was low. Slovenia is the outlier as it has stringent policies. Belgium also had the highest mortality at 67.0 per 100,000 people. Although mortality seems not to play the main role in how much people trust the government, it does seem noteworthy that of the sample Belgium had the biggest decrease in trust as well as the highest mortality.

Overall, it seems unclear how mortality impacted trust, as there does not seem to be a consistent pattern throughout. Higher PPI seems consistently associated with higher increases in trust. However, lower mortality seems to have little effect on increasing trust. It is interesting to note that the average trust for non-stringent policies and high mortality was higher than the trust for non-stringent policies and low mortality. It is possible this difference could be due to factors outside of the COVID-19 pandemic.

5. Conclusion

Overall, this data seems to show an association between stringent COVID-19 measures and increased trust. Although not occurring in every country, there is a spike in trust occurring during the Summer 2020 Eurobarometer poll in most countries (the onset of COVID-19 having

occurred between then and the last poll in Autumn 2019). However, this trust increase has not been long lasting. Overall, there has not been a significantly large sustained increase when compared to pre-pandemic trust levels, but there have been some notable increases between Autumn 2019 and Summer 2020. In the EU 28 overall, as represented in figure 4, after 2020 the trust levels fall back down to what they roughly were before the pandemic.

Looking at Figure 4, the EU28 overall trust level jumped up 6% between Autumn 2019 and Summer 2020. Countries with the largest spikes in trust included Austria, Croatia, Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Greece, and the Netherlands. After Summer 2020, changes in trust level seem to be less dramatic overall. The overall EU change between Summer and Winter 2020 is 4%, and the change is 1% between Winter 2020 and Spring 2021. In the polls after these, average changes for the EU overall range from 0% to 4%. This seems to indicate the beginning of the pandemic may have had an effect on an increase in trust, but the average changes since then have not shown a significant difference when compared to the past.

As shown in Table 12, more stringent measures are seen to be associated with higher increases in trust. This persists even with high mortality rates. This leads to further questions on whether the actual effectiveness of stringent measures is important, or if it is rather just the appearance of these measures that is driving trust. Further research is needed to explore the psychology behind this relationship.

The introduction of this paper referenced some examples of countries that experienced civil unrest over COVID-19 measures. Looking at trust levels according to the Eurobarometer does not seem to show that this is indicative of any wider trend. For example, looking at Germany, trust increased between the Autumn 2019 and the Summer 2020 poll by 11 points, despite August 2020 being when the protests occurred. Germany’s COVID-19 response was

stringent, which explains the reasons for protests, but also has shown to be associated with increased trust in government. Other countries that experienced civil unrest, such as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, also had an increase in trust. So, these demonstrations seem to represent a vocal minority rather than larger trends in trust and government.

Despite previous literature expecting a general decrease in trust after a worldwide pandemic, the immediate aftermath does not show this. Overall, there is no significant decrease in trust. Instead, most countries saw an initial increase in trust or minimal change. However, after 2020, trust generally fell, but only to pre-pandemic levels rather than falling lower. Considering the last Eurobarometer poll before the pandemic (Autumn 2019) and the most recent one (Autumn 2023), the Autumn 2023 EU28 trust level is actually 2% higher, from 34% to 36%. So, trust is still increasing, but less dramatically than during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the sample of time after the pandemic is extremely limited, and the long term effects of the pandemic on politics is still unknown. Many of the studies cited in the literature review studied the long term effects of pandemics and other disasters on trust rather than just the immediate aftermath. Saka (2021) explained how early life experiences with pandemics leads to distrust later on. So, this may still hold true, but this can not yet be proved. However, this paper hopefully bridges some of the gap in explaining how trust in government was impacted during the pandemic. Overall, there has been no trend in Europe showing that the COVID-19 negatively impacted trust in the pandemic era and the current post-pandemic era.

However, it is not just the pandemic impacting trust levels as previously mentioned. Normal politics and economic conditions still have an effect on trust. It is important to consider this when looking at how trust has changed. Various factors such as GDP and change in national leadership are also important to look at in further research. Although COVID-19 might’ve been

the largest concern of most nations at the time, it is also possible that other factors would have influenced such a large change.

Analyzing the effects the pandemic has had on trust levels is important to consider for future government actions. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed governments worldwides, as they have expanded their authority through protective policies, which had mixed results on trust; trust has increased during the pandemic, but so has civil unrest over COVID-19 related measures. Overall, higher PPI was associated with higher increases in trust. It is still important to research this question, as it is still unclear how much COVID-19 impacted trust levels compared to other factors at the same time. Another important question is what the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will be, which can not yet be proven.

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