

Trust in Government Institutions: A Comparison of Attitudes Between the British and Polish Governments

Ziying Jiang*

The University of Manchester, M601QW, UK

*Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.

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Abstract: In early 2022, British politics gave us the first great scandal of the year, ‘Partygate’^[1]. At the time, a survey across 6 countries in Europe showed that 62% of UK respondents to the survey feel that their government ‘ignores rules and procedures’, the highest of all countries. Other things that were happening at the time. The European Commission’s litigation initiation against Warsaw over the Polish ruling party’s ‘democratic decapitation’ of the judiciary^[2]. How bad is the state of democracy when citizens no longer trust that our government institutions play by the rules? This paper employs data from the 9th European Social Survey Round (2018-2019) and compares government trust in the UK (N = 2204) and Poland (N = 1500). This was a pivotal time for the UK, given its Brexit negotiations, and for Poland in their court reform battles with the EU^[3].

Keywords: Partygate, government trust; rule of law; Democratic backsliding; Judicial independence; Poland; United Kingdom; European Social Survey (ESS); European commission

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1. Levels of trust: A stable structure across countries

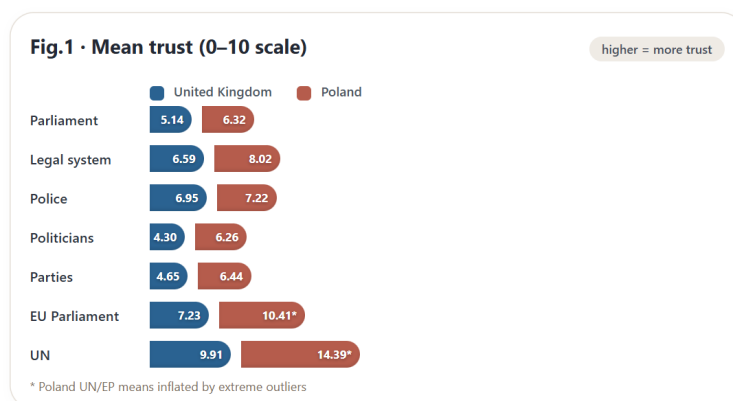


Figure 1. Average trust scores for seven institutions in the UK and Poland.

There is a clear pattern here (**Figure 1**). In both the UK and Poland, people trust most in regulatory institutions (police, legal system), least in representative institutions (politicians, parties, parliament)^[4].

For the UK, the police come top (6.95). Next is the legal system (6.59). Bottom place is taken by politicians (4.30). Next are government parties (4.65) and parliament (5.14). The difference between police and politicians is 2.65 points – in other words, on a 0-10 scale, Britons trust rule-enforcers more than rule-makers by more than a quarter-point on the scale.

Poland looks similar. The top are police (7.22) and the legal system (8.02). Bottom are politicians (6.26) and government parties (6.44). There is a gap here, but it is rather small (0.96 points). Citizens are able to distinguish between non-competitive enforcers and competitive representatives. Whatever the government system or national history, Britons and Poles alike trust more those whom citizens call upon to “enforce the rules” than those whom they call upon to “make the rules” ^[5].

2. Differences in amount and nature: Poland’s “High Trust” vs. the UK’s “Low Trust”

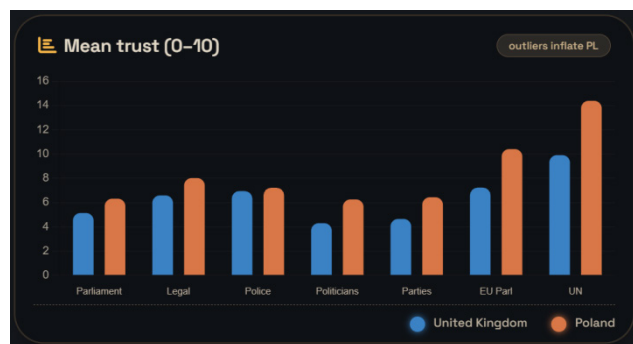


Figure 2. Mean trust between the UK and Poland.

Figure 2 is the first of the surprising results: Poland has a higher average trust score than the UK for every single institution listed. Which seems odd to say the least, given Poland’s crisis with the EU over the judiciary. But Poland’s scores have a very wide spread: the standard deviation for the UN is 25.61, for the European Parliament 21.21, and for the legal system 17.44. So it isn’t consensus that raises the high average, but a few with extreme attitudes. The median tells a completely different story in the following diagram. It shows that a typical Polish citizen actually trusts domestic institutions less than a typical British citizen.

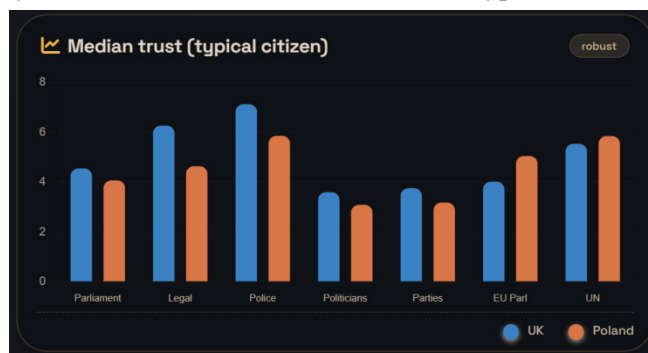


Figure 3. Median trust between the UK and Poland.

Poland’s “high trust” is an illusion created by a small number of people who trust the system a lot. The UK’s “low trust” is a shared feeling of doubt among most people. In Poland, trust is polarized. In the UK, trust is marked by widespread skepticism (Figure 3).

3. The extremes of trust: Who trusts, and who doesn't?

When we look at the percentage in the very high trust group (8-10 scores), we find that Poland has two peaks of trust: more are extremely low trust, but also more extremely high trust (**Figure 4**).

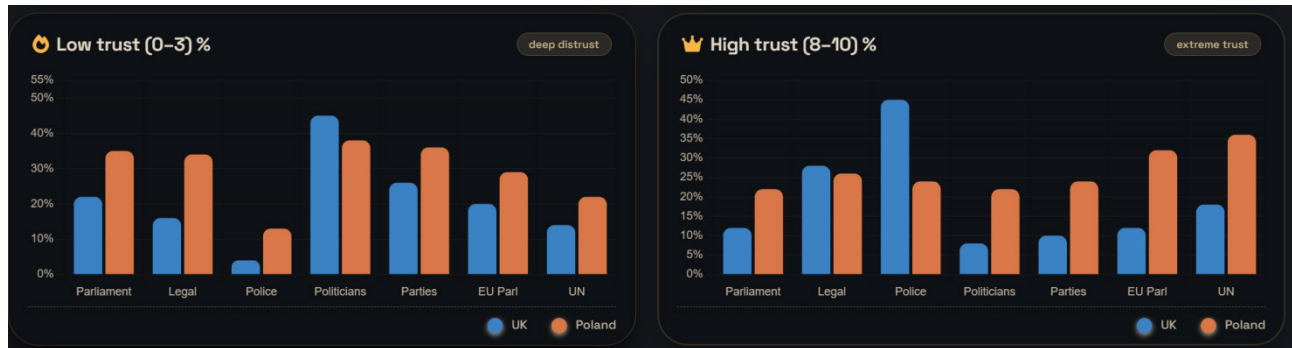


Figure 4. The extremely low trust and high trust group between the UK and Poland.

In an extremely low trust group, for politicians: in Poland, 38% very low trust, 22% very high trust. In the UK, 45% very low trust, 8% very high trust. Poland is spread out, while the UK is polarised with most clustered at the “very low” end ^[6].

This means that government trust in Poland is polarised. It isn't a consensus that raises the high average, but a few with extreme attitudes. For the UK, government trust is characterized by widespread doubt. Everyone is skeptical, and a few are extreme.

The data on the police is consistent. In the UK, 45% are very high trust and 4% very low. This is “general trust”. 24% very high trust and 13% very low in Poland. This is “moderate trust with internal divisions” ^[7].

The difference is that in the UK, the police are seen as above politics ^[8]. In Poland, even the police are government ^[9].

4. The collapse of government efficacy: A crisis shared by both countries

If trust is about judging institutions, government efficacy is about how people feel about their position ^[10]. By this measure, the alarm sounds in both countries (**Figure 5**).

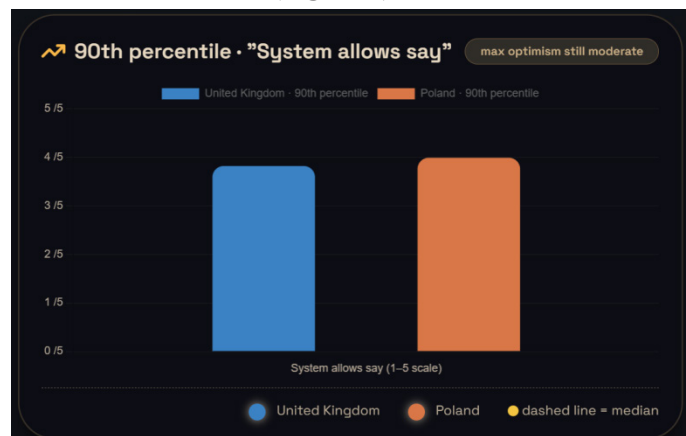


Figure 5. 90th percentile group on government efficacy.

In neither country did even the most optimistic 10% (90th percentile) manage a 4. In Poland, they scored 3.99; in the UK, 3.82. In other words, even the citizens who felt most positive about their government influence still don't feel "very high", but "moderately positive". The Polish median score for the question "have a say in what the government does" was close to 2.36; in the UK, 2.40.

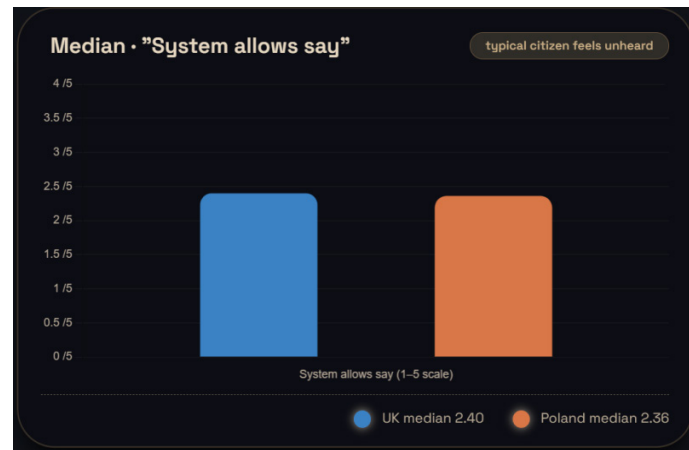


Figure 6. Medium group on external efficacy.

This is also a crisis of external efficacy, a crisis of "the system will listen to me". It is the external efficacy component of democratic legitimacy^[11]. Take away that sense, and people will be apathetic. They will also be susceptible to extreme, anti-establishment movements^[12].

From the data, we see people in both countries trusting in the police to keep the peace and the courts to settle disputes. The evidence may suggest that citizens do not trust the politicians. However, the significant findings could indicate that the input side of democracy appears broken, with key results showing that expressing opinions and participating may no longer function effectively.

5. Conclusion: Two crises, one warning

The UK and Poland may suggest that two distinct types of polarised trust crisis with the same problem. Poland's crisis belongs to polarised trust and distrust. Those who score very low in trust in politicians/parties are less numerous than in the UK. But a much larger proportion scores very high trust and hence displays the two-peak pattern. In light of these results, a much larger proportion could demonstrate very high trust, and therefore, the data may suggest that this produces the two-peak pattern. Moreover, when the legal system is seen as government, the system of checks and balances might not work as intended.

In contrast, the UK's crisis may suggest that polarised trust combined with widespread doubt could indicate a fundamentally different pattern. It shows that very few score extreme numbers, and most score moderately negative. This could suggest that a theater mindset may demonstrate itself through citizens watching from the side and remaining generally disappointed. That is, if nobody believes in government leaders, the democratic representation might not function effectively^[13]. And if people think they have no say, the government engagement might demonstrate a serious and sustained decline^[14].

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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