

Social Trust, Political Ideology and Democratic Satisfaction in Europe: A Comparative Analysis 2002–2024

Confianza social, ideología política y satisfacción democrática en Europa: un análisis comparado 2002–2024

José A. López-Ruiz  | josealr@comillas.edu
Pontifical University, Spain

10.17502/mrcs.v13i2.889

Received: 14-08-2025

Accepted: 27-10-2025



Abstract

This article examines the impact of ideological polarization on generalized social trust and satisfaction with democracy in Europe using data from eleven rounds of the European Social Survey (2002–2024). The analysis adopts a comparative perspective across three regional blocs: southern European countries (EU South), the historical core of the EU (EU Core), and countries that joined after the 2004 enlargement (EU Enlarged). Non-parametric techniques and regression models are applied to explore three key dimensions: the temporal evolution of trust, the effects of political ideology, and the relationship between social trust and democratic support. The findings show that interpersonal trust has not uniformly declined across Europe; instead, divergent regional trajectories emerge: increasing trust in EU Enlarged, stability in EU South, and higher levels in the EU Core. Individuals at ideological extremes tend to exhibit different levels of trust and democratic satisfaction, though this varies significantly across regions. As a main contribution, empirical evidence confirms that social trust consistently predicts satisfaction with democracy, especially in countries with stronger democratic institutions. The study contributes to the understanding of the link between political polarization and social capital, highlighting the relevance of regional context in analyzing democratic legitimacy.

Keywords: civic engagement, cross-national studies, ideological polarization, political attitudes, social capital.

Resumen

Este artículo examina el impacto de la polarización ideológica sobre la confianza social generalizada y la satisfacción con la democracia en Europa con datos de once rondas del European Social Survey (2002–2024). El análisis adopta una perspectiva comparada entre tres bloques regionales: países del sur de Europa (EU Sur), el núcleo histórico de la UE (UE Centro) y países incorporados tras la ampliación de 2004 (UE Ampliada). Se aplican técnicas no paramétricas y modelos de regresión para explorar tres dimensiones: evolución temporal de la confianza, efectos de la ideología política y relación entre confianza social y apoyo democrático. Los resultados muestran que no existe un deterioro uniforme en la confianza interpersonal, sino trayectorias diferenciadas: aumento en UE Ampliada, estabilidad en EU Sur y niveles más altos en UE Centro. Los extremos ideológicos presentan diferentes niveles de confianza y satisfacción democrática, aunque con variaciones regionales. Como contribución principal, la evidencia empírica confirma que la confianza social predice consistentemente la satisfacción con la democracia, con mayor intensidad en contextos institucionales consolidados. El estudio contribuye a comprender el vínculo entre polarización política y capital social, destacando la importancia del contexto regional en el análisis de la legitimidad democrática.

Palabras clave: actitudes políticas, capital social, estudios transnacionales, participación ciudadana, polarización ideológica.

Summary

1. Introduction | 2. Theoretical framework | 2.1 Social Trust in Sociological Theory and Contemporary Research | 2.2 Social Trust and Political Ideology | 2.3 The Relationship Between Social Trust and Satisfaction with Democracy | 2.4 Regional Differences in the European Context | 3. Methodology | 3.1. Objectives and Hypotheses | 3.2. Regional Grouping and Sample Description (ESS 2002-2024) | 3.3. Variables and Data Processing | 4. Results | 4.1. Trends in Generalized Social Trust by Country Group | 4.2. Trends in Satisfaction with Democracy by Country Group | 4.3. Trends in Political Ideology and Ideological Extremes | 4.4. Political Ideology, Trust, and Democratic Satisfaction | 4.5. Relationship Between Generalized Social Trust and Satisfaction with Democracy | 5. Discussion | 6. Conclusions | References.

How to cite this work

López-Ruiz, J. Á. (2025). *Social Trust, Political Ideology and Democratic Satisfaction in Europe: A Comparative Analysis 2002–2024*. *methaodos.revista de ciencias sociales*, 13(2), m251302a01. <https://doi.org/10.17502/mrcs.v13i2.889>

1. Introduction

In contemporary European democracies, interpersonal trust and support for political institutions are essential elements of the stability and legitimacy of the democratic order. However, in the current context of overlapping crises –economic, institutional, geopolitical, and environmental –many European countries have experienced a partial erosion of these bonds of trust, alongside growing ideological and political polarization. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced at the extremes of the left-right axis, where perceptions of democratic disaffection and cultural threat intensify.

These shifts raise a set of key questions: What is the relationship between social trust and evaluations of democratic performance in different European contexts? To what extent does ideological polarization—especially in its most extreme expressions— affect that relationship?

This study conducts a comparative empirical analysis was conducted using data from the European Social Survey (ESS), which has been periodically collected in more than 20 European countries since 2002. This longitudinal design makes it possible to examine the joint evolution of generalized social trust, satisfaction with democratic systems, and ideological positioning over the course of two decades.

The analysis accounts for structural and contextual differences by grouping the countries into three regional blocs: the historical core of the European Union (EU Core) –which also includes Austria, Sweden, and Finland, due to their early integration and institutional similarity to the Western European model; the Southern bloc (EU South); and the countries incorporated after the 2004 and 2007 enlargements (EU Enlarged).

The term Core thus refers primarily to an institutional and socio-political criterion, rather than a geographic one. It encompasses states with greater continuity in the European project and with more consolidated welfare and social trust structures. Analytically, this bloc represents the normative and governance nucleus of the Union, in contrast with the Southern and post-communist models, whose historical trajectories and levels of social capital differ substantially. This comparative strategy makes it possible to identify differentiated patterns in the relationship between trust and democracy, as well as to assess the effects of ideological polarization according to regional and historical context.

From a comparative perspective, the analysis explores how structures of trust interact with the political and ideological cultures of each region. The empirical approach is structured around three interrelated analytical axes: first, the temporal evolution of social trust and satisfaction with democracy; second, the impact of ideological positioning and polarization at the extremes of the spectrum; and third, the interrelation between both dimensions of trust. Through this comparative design and the analysis of eleven rounds of the ESS (2002–2024), the study aims to identify patterns of stability or transformation, as well as structural asymmetries across national contexts. Since the key variables display non-normal distributions in most cases, non-parametric techniques are used to more accurately capture deviations from normality and the non-linear effects of ideological positioning.

Preliminary findings point to several relevant observations: there is no uniform trend of decline in interpersonal trust or satisfaction with democracy; however, marked regional differences are evident. Ideological extremes tend to be associated with lower levels of both trust and democratic support, while the relationship between social trust and democratic satisfaction proves significant across contexts, albeit with varying intensity. These initial insights guide the analysis of three central research questions structuring this study: (1) What patterns of stability or change do social trust and democratic satisfaction exhibit across the different regional blocs? (2) How does ideological positioning –particularly at the extremes– affect these indicators?; and (3) To what extent does social trust predict satisfaction with democracy, and how does this relationship evolve over time? Before proceeding to the empirical analysis, the following section outlines the theoretical framework underlying the relationships among trust, ideology, and democracy.

2. Theoretical Framework

The following sections develop the conceptual foundations of social trust within sociological theory and contemporary research, examining its relationship with political ideology and satisfaction with democracy.

2.1. Social Trust in Sociological Theory and Contemporary Research

Social trust is a central concept in contemporary sociology, closely linked to social capital, social cohesion, and institutional performance. Three main forms of trust can be distinguished: generalized trust –the belief that most people, including strangers, can be trusted; particularized trust –directed toward close social circles; and institutional trust, associated with perceptions of legitimacy and institutional performance (Zmerli & Newton, 2017).

From structural and relational perspectives, social trust functions as a mechanism that allows individuals to act under conditions of uncertainty, reducing the complexity of social interaction and facilitating cooperation beyond direct exchange. This conception draws on classical theories that interpret trust as a means of coping with uncertainty in complex societies, while more recent approaches understand it as a relational resource based on expectations of reciprocity (Hardin, 2002). In its moral dimension, trust is viewed as a generalized disposition toward others, grounded in internalized values of equality and justice, and less dependent on direct experience than on learning within egalitarian environments (Uslaner, 2018).

Longitudinal studies in consolidated democracies show a sustained decline in institutional trust, linked to perceived corruption, inequality, and political polarization. According to Norris (2022), this erosion reflects the gap between citizens' expectations and institutional performance. Similarly, Wilkinson & Pickett (2009) demonstrate that socioeconomic inequality undermines interpersonal trust and social cohesion. Goubin & Hooghe (2020) find that inequality correlates with lower political trust across European countries, while Rothstein & Uslaner (2005) confirm that more egalitarian societies tend to display higher levels of generalized trust.

Comparative research based on surveys such as the European Social Survey (ESS) and the World Values Survey (WVS) has enabled long-term monitoring of these trends (Glatz & Eder, 2020; Glatz & Schwerdtfeger, 2022; Robbins, 2012). Despite methodological advances, debate persists over the link between social and institutional trust, Zmerli & Newton (2017) argue that no conclusive evidence supports a mutually reinforcing relationship between them.

In this study, social trust is approached as both a core component of social capital and a context-sensitive indicator. Unlike institutional trust, which fluctuates with political circumstances, interpersonal trust reflects more stable dispositions –though still influenced by ideological polarization and the deterioration of institutional quality.

2.2. Social Trust and Political Ideology

Political ideology plays a significant role in shaping social trust, particularly in contexts of increasing polarization. Recent studies emphasize that not only do substantive ideological differences matter, but so does affective polarization –that is, hostility toward those on the opposite side of the ideological spectrum. As Mason (2018) notes, politics has increasingly become an extension of social identity, intensifying group-based antagonism and weakening interpersonal trust.

In Spain, Torcal (2023) documents a sustained rise in affective polarization, with negative consequences for both social ties and institutional trust. Similar patterns appear in comparative studies linking low social trust with authoritarian attitudes and political exclusion (Inglehart & Welzel, 2010; Uslaner, 2018). From the perspective of modernization theory, Inglehart and Welzel (2010) argue that the transition toward self-expression values fosters interpersonal trust and democratic support, while Uslaner (2002) highlights the moral foundations of trust rooted in equality and reciprocity. Combined with institutional performance (Norris, 2022), these factors contribute to higher levels of democratic legitimacy.

Over recent decades, the ideological composition of the European Parliament has reflected broader transformations in political culture and polarization among member states. Whereas centrist parties dominated in the early 2000s, the landscape is now more fragmented, with growing representation of populist and Eurosceptic movements –both on the right (European Conservatives and Reformists, Identity and Democracy, Patriots for Europe) and on the left (*The Left*). This shift illustrates deeper tensions between integration and sovereignty, and between cosmopolitanism and national retrenchment. These trends display regional nuances: in the EU Core, fragmentation has been moderate and has not substantially eroded institutional trust; in the

South, the economic crisis widened the gap between citizens and institutions; and in the EU Enlarged, weak institutions and low historical trust have facilitated populist discourse.

Empirical evidence indicates that ideological orientation correlates with differing levels of trust: authoritarian or conservative orientations are generally linked to lower trust toward out-groups and greater institutional skepticism (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010; Zmerli & Newton, 2017). Likewise, ideological polarization—the increasing separation toward ideological extremes—reduces the willingness to compromise, while affective polarization heightens emotional rejection of ideological opponents (Iyengar *et al.*, 2019b; Torcal & Comellas, 2022).

In summary, the relationship between ideology and social trust is two-dimensional: it depends on both individual orientations and the political context in which it is expressed, becoming especially relevant in environments characterized by disaffection and polarization.

2.3. The Relationship between Social Trust and Satisfaction with Democracy

From the early studies on social capital and trust in the 1990s to more recent comparative analyses, the literature consistently highlights the central role of social trust in sustaining democratic support. Foundational works established that interpersonal trust enhances institutional effectiveness and democratic legitimacy (Putnam, 1993; Newton, 2001; Levi & Stoker, 2000; Seligson, 2002). These studies emphasized that trust fosters cooperation, civic engagement, and public participation, whereas its erosion can lead to political apathy or the rise of populist and authoritarian alternatives. More recent evidence reinforces this relationship: contexts with higher levels of trust and community engagement tend to have more effective institutions, lower perceived corruption, and more satisfied citizens (Putnam, 2020; Murtin *et al.*, 2018; OECD, 2022; Norris, 2022).

In settings where interpersonal trust is low, satisfaction with democracy also tends to be lower, which in turn can erode institutional legitimacy. This relationship becomes even more salient in contexts marked by polarization, inequality, and institutional crises, which weaken the foundations of social trust. Although the causal direction between trust and democracy remains debated, comparative evidence points to a strong and consistent association between them. This study examines the extent to which social trust predicts democratic satisfaction across different European contexts, with particular attention to the effects of ideological polarization and regional variation in its intensity. However, this relationship takes different forms depending on the institutional and cultural context of each European region. Understanding these variations is essential for interpreting the empirical results, particularly when comparing the historical EU Core, the Southern countries, and those incorporated through the Eastern enlargements.

2.4. Regional Differences in the European Context

Following the examination of the influence of political ideology and democratic satisfaction on social trust, this section extends the analysis to the regional dimension, considering how structural, institutional, and welfare disparities across Europe shape social trust.

In Eastern European countries, democratic consolidation has coincided with persistently low levels of trust. This lack of social trust is reflected in community and interpersonal networks, where authoritarian legacies continue to constrain social cohesion and relational capital (Rapoliéné & Aartsen, 2022). Comparative studies attribute these patterns to structural inequalities and weak traditions of civic engagement (Berdea & Mihei, 2014). In contrast, in Central and Northern Europe, institutional stability and more developed welfare systems have fostered equality and higher levels of interpersonal trust (Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005; Glatz & Eder, 2020).

Differences in trust and democratic satisfaction are not only shaped by socioeconomic structures but also by political systems and welfare regimes. Mewes (2024) shows that universal welfare regimes, characteristic of Northern and Central Europe, tend to promote trust, while selective or means-tested systems, typical of Southern and Eastern Europe, may erode it—especially when welfare benefits are perceived as undeserved.

Overall, research confirms persistent disparities in trust and democratic satisfaction across Europe. Northern and Western countries exhibit higher levels of interpersonal and institutional trust, supported by robust welfare states, greater equality, and stable political systems (Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005). In contrast, Southern and Eastern European countries show lower trust levels, influenced by authoritarian legacies, economic instability,

and weaker institutional performance (Norris, 2022; Glatz & Eder, 2020). Olivera (2015) also finds significant cross-national differences in the relationship between inequality and trust, though this effect diminishes when controlling for country-specific factors. Instead, variables such as linguistic and ethnic fragmentation, discrimination, and crime rates retain a stable and negative impact on social trust. While some convergence in trust and civic participation has been observed (Sarracino & Mikucka, 2017), these regional divides remain.

In summary, enduring regional differences and Europe's evolving ideological landscape justify a comparative approach that makes it possible to examine how political polarization and democratic satisfaction are articulated with levels of social trust in each context. On this basis, the hypotheses and analytical strategies presented in the following section are formulated.

3. Methodology

The methodological section and the empirical results examine this relationship from a longitudinal and comparative perspective, drawing on eleven rounds of the European Social Survey (ESS) collected between 2002 and 2024.

3.1. Objectives and hypotheses

Using ESS data, this study adopts a comparative strategy to analyse the evolution of generalized social trust (GTRUST), satisfaction with democracy (STFDEM), and political ideology (IDPOLC). Countries are grouped into three regional blocs: the historical core of the European Union (EU Core), Southern Europe (EU South), and the post-2004 enlargement countries (EU Enlarged). This classification –grounded in institutional criteria and socio-economic trajectories– enables comparisons across contexts with different degrees of democratic consolidation, welfare-state models, and levels of social capital.

The specific objectives (SO) and their corresponding hypotheses (H) are as follows:

SO₁: To describe the evolution of GTRUST and STFDEM by regional group.

H₁: There is no general downward trend in social trust.

H₂: Differences between regional groups outweigh internal variations.

SO₂: To analyze the effect of ideological positioning on trust and democratic satisfaction.

H₃: Ideological extremes are associated with lower levels of trust and satisfaction across all three regional blocs.

SO₃: To explore whether social trust predicts satisfaction with democracy.

H₄: A significant relationship exists between the two, with regional and temporal variations.

3.2. Regional Grouping and Sample Description (ESS 2002-2024)

Nineteen EU countries were selected based on their participation in at least six rounds of the ESS. These countries were grouped as follows: EU Core: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, EU South: Spain, Italy, Portugal, and Greece (although data are incomplete for some rounds) and EU Enlarged: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia.

The total sample consists of more than 300,000 cases, distributed across seven selected ESS rounds between 2002 and 2024 (Rounds 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 10, and 11). Between the initial and final rounds, five additional waves are included (Rounds 3, 5, 7, 9, and 10). Table 1 details the sample by country for each round prior to weighting for analysis. All cross-national and regional-block comparisons were conducted using the weighting factors recommended by the ESS –specifically, the ANNWEIGHT variable– in accordance with the methodological guidelines outlined by Kaminska (2020). The use of weighted data ensures both representativeness and comparability across regions, correcting for potential differences in sample size among the blocs.

Table 1. Sample Description: Unweighted Cases

ESS Rounds	Total	COUNTRYG		
		UE Core	UE South	UE Enlarged
Total	307571	124986	44918	49312
R1 2002	42359	20545	7013	5155
R3 2006	43000	20516	4098	6405
R5 2010	52458	18241	6750	9988
R7 2014	40185	20479	3190	5461
R9 2018	49519	19593	5468	8840
R10 2020	39894	9284	9560	8461
R11 2023/24	40156	16328	8839	5002

Source. Own elaboration.

3.3. Variables and Data Processing

The original variables were transformed and cleaned according to the following specifications:

- Generalized social trust (GTRUST): Constructed as the mean of three items measuring interpersonal trust—“Most people try to take advantage of others” (PPLFAIR), “Are people mostly helpful or mostly looking out for themselves?” (PPLHLP), and “Most people can be trusted / you can’t be too careful” (PPLTRST). Only valid values between 0 and 10 were considered. The cross-cultural comparability of the generalized trust item in the ESS has been extensively validated (Reeskens & Hooghe, 2008).
- Satisfaction with democracy (STFDEM): Measured on a 0–10 scale assessing respondents’ satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in their country (“How satisfied with the way democracy works in country?”).
- Political ideology (IDPOLC): Derived from recoding the left–right self-placement scale (LRSCALE, 0–10) into five categories [extreme left (0–2), left (3–4), centre (5), right (6–7), and extreme right (8–10)]. This classification follows the criteria proposed by Scholz & Zuell (2016) to improve the substantive interpretation of ideological extremes, enhance cross-regional and cross-round comparability, reduce sensitivity to outliers, and allow the use of non-parametric tests, since it does not assume a linear relationship between ideology and trust.
- Country groups (COUNTRYG): Variable classifying countries into three European regions according to institutional and historical criteria of integration—Core, Southern Europe, and Enlarged Europe.
- Periods (YEARC): Aggregates rounds into three temporal blocks [2002–2010 (R1–R5), 2014–2020 (R7–R10), and 2023/24 (R11)] to facilitate longitudinal analysis.
- Weights (ANNWEIGHT): Variable applied in all analyses to incorporate ESS design weights and ensure sample representativeness.

Normality tests (Kolmogorov–Smirnov) indicated that the variables did not follow a normal distribution; therefore, non-parametric techniques (Kruskal–Wallis) were applied to test group differences for specific objectives OE_1 and OE_2 . For the explanatory analysis of OE_3 —focused on the relationship between social trust and democratic satisfaction—simple linear regressions were used. This analytical design allows the identification of comparative patterns and the assessment of the robustness of the associations proposed in the theoretical model.

4. Results

To test the proposed hypotheses, we first compare trends in ESS outcomes for generalized social trust (GTRUST), satisfaction with democracy (STFDEM), and political ideology (IDPOLC). Second, we analyze how ideological extremes in IDPOLC may affect outcomes in GTRUST and STFDEM. Third, we examine the extent to which GTRUST predicts STFDEM.

4.1. Trends in Generalized Social Trust by Country Group

Longitudinal data reveal differentiated trajectories. For the EU Core, trust levels remain high and stable over time (Mean = 5.28 in 2002–2010; 5.53 in 2014–2020 and 2023/24). This consistency supports Hypothesis H₁, which posited the absence of a systematic decline.

In the case of the EU South, the mean GTRUST increases slightly in the second wave, followed by a stabilization (Mean = 4.61 – 4.70 and 4.69). The median remains constant (4.67), suggesting a centered distribution with no substantial shifts. And in the EU Enlarged group, the increase is more pronounced, rising from 4.15 to 4.71, which suggests a convergence toward the levels seen in the South. This indicates a sustained improvement: from relatively low levels in 2002–2010 to the latest wave.

Differences between country groups are statistically significant across all periods, according to the Kruskal-Wallis test ($p < 0.001$). These results confirm Hypothesis H₂, which anticipated greater variability between regional blocs than within them. The test was conducted separately for each time period in the series.

When comparing country pairs and disaggregating by temporal segments, the differences remain statistically significant in nearly all cases: in the periods 2002–2010 and 2014–2020, the equality of distributions is rejected for all pairwise comparisons (Kruskal-Wallis, $p < 0.001$). With one exception, in the third period, the difference between the EU South and EU Enlarged groups is not statistically significant ($p = 0.147$ for 2023/24). In the latest wave (2023/24), the gap between the EU South and the EU Enlarged has narrowed.

4.2. Changes in Democratic Satisfaction by Regional Bloc

Compared to social trust, the patterns of democratic satisfaction are more varied across regions and over time (Table 2). In the EU Core, a slight decline is observed in the most recent round (Mean = 5.21 – 5.40 and 5.07). In the EU South, satisfaction gradually decreases (5.13 – 4.83 and 4.77), whereas in the EU Enlarged group, satisfaction increases steadily (4.36 – 4.74 and 4.97), reaching a level comparable to the other blocs in 2023/24.

In Southern European countries, this decline may be related to processes of institutional disaffection or perceptions of democratic inefficacy. In contrast, countries in the EU Enlarged group experience a consistent rise in satisfaction, within a political and cultural context that differs significantly from that of the other regions. While the EU Core started with the highest levels of satisfaction and the EU South with the lowest, by the end of the series the three blocs converge, with slightly higher satisfaction levels in the EU Enlarged group.

Overall, these regional differences are also statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), reinforcing Hypothesis H₂. However, the hypothesis of a uniform democratic decline is not supported. When comparing country groups, significant differences appear between the EU South and the EU Enlarged in Rounds 1–5 (2002–2010, $p < 0.001$), but not in Rounds 7–10 (2014–2020, $p = 0.589$). Similarly, no significant difference is observed between the EU Enlarged and the EU Core in Round 11 (2023/24, $p = 0.259$).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics: GTRUST and STFDEM by Country Group (COUNTRYG) and Period

COUNTRYG	ESS Rounds (COUNTRYG)										
	2002-2010 (R1-5)			2014-2020 (R7-10)			2023/24 (R11)			Total N	
	M	Md	IQR	M	Md	IQR	M	Md	IQR		
GTRUST (0-10)	UE Center	5.28	5.33	2.00	5.53	5.67	2.33	5.53	5.67	2.33	151697
	UE South	4.61	4.67	2.67	4.70	5.00	2.67	4.69	4.67	2.67	57326
	UE Enlarged	4.15	4.33	2.33	4.39	4.33	2.67	4.71	5.00	2.67	34744
STFDEM (0-10)	UE Center	5.21	5.00	3.00	5.40	6.00	3.00	5.07	5.00	4.00	147894
	UE South	5.13	5.00	3.00	4.83	5.00	4.00	4.77	5.00	3.00	55175
	UE Enlarged	4.36	5.00	3.00	4.74	5.00	4.00	4.97	5.00	4.00	32968
IDPOLC (1-5)	UE Center	2.95	3.00	2.00	2.94	3.00	2.00	2.87	3.00	2.00	138437
	UE South	2.84	3.00	2.00	2.86	3.00	2.00	2.98	3.00	2.00	47028
	UE Enlarged	3.22	3.00	2.00	3.32	3.00	1.00	3.25	3.00	3.00	29164

Note: M = Mean. IQR=Interquartile Range. The original self-placement ideology variable (IDPOL) was recoded into five categories: 1 = far left (0–2), 2 = left (3–4), 3 = center (5), 4 = right (6–7), 5 = far right (8–10). Recoding was carried out to facilitate comparison across clearly defined ideological groups and to reduce interpretive variability across countries, while maintaining consistency with previous comparative studies (Zuelli & Scholz, 2016).

Source. Own elaboration.

4.3. Trends in Political Ideology and Ideological Extremes

Over the time series, the ideological distribution in the EU Enlarged group shows a shift toward the right (Mean: 3.22 → 3.32 → 3.25), while the EU Core maintains a stable average, slightly leaning to the left. In Southern Europe, a slight rightward shift is also observed at the end of the period.

Although not the main objective of the analysis, it is relevant to contextualize the evolution of citizens' ideological positioning in Europe, with particular attention to the extremes of the scale. Table 2 presents the mean, median, and interquartile range (IQR) of the IDPOLC scale for each country group at three points in time: 2002–2010 (Rounds 1–5), 2014–2020 (Rounds 7–10), and 2023/24 (Round 11).

The results indicate statistically significant differences across all time periods (Kruskal-Wallis, $p < 0.001$), reflecting that ideological patterns vary systematically between regions. In the EU Core group, a slight decrease in the mean is observed (from 2.95 to 2.87), suggesting a modest shift toward more left-leaning positions. This trend is accompanied by a gradual decrease in the median, which remains around 3.00 with a stable IQR –indicating a persistent level of internal diversity.

Among the EU South countries, the mean increases slightly (from 2.84 to 2.98), suggesting a shift toward the right – a trend consistent with the evolution of the scale's extreme values discussed below. This transformation is also reflected in the stability of the median (3.00), but with an IQR that remains constant, indicating a degree of polarization driven by the extension of the distribution's right tail.

The most notable trend is found in the EU Enlarged group, which begins with a higher mean (3.22) that rises to 3.32 in 2014–2020 and then slightly decreases to 3.25 in 2023/24. Although the median remains stable (3.00), the drop in the IQR during the final period (from 2.00 to 1.00) suggests a movement toward more ideologically defined positions, with reduced dispersion. In this case, the shift is toward the right of the spectrum.

Table 3 presents the percentages for each ideological group, recoded into five categories: far left, left, center, right, and far right. In all three country groups, there is a notable and sustained decline in the ideological center, accompanied by increases at both extremes –especially the far right in the EU Enlarged group, which reaches 26.2% in Round 11, the highest among the three regional blocs. In contrast, the far left shows similar levels across the three groups by the end of the series (13.7% in both the EU Core and EU South; 14.5% in the EU Enlarged). These results suggest increasing polarization, particularly within the EU Enlarged group, with a gradual erosion of the ideological center.

Table 3. Political Ideology Scale Positions: Percentages by Category with Pearson's Chi-square Test and Mean Values by Country Group with Kruskal-Wallis Test

	IDPOL	2002-2010 (R1-5)	2014-2020 (R7-10)	2023/24 (R11)
EU Center	Far-left (0-2)	10.7% _a	12.4% _b	13.7% _c
	Left (3-4)	23.3% _a	22.6% _b	23.7% _a
	Center	36.1% _a	34.4% _b	33.7% _b
	Right (6-7)	19.9% _a	20.1% _a	19.4% _a
	Far-right (8-10)	10.0% _a	10.6% _b	9.4% _c
	Mean	4.9 _a	4.9 _a	4.7 _b
EU South	Far-left (0-2)	13.6% _a	17.8% _b	13.7% _a
	Left (3-4)	26.9% _a	23.1% _b	23.4% _b
	Center	32.0% _a	27.9% _b	28.3% _b
	Right (6-7)	17.5% _a	17.7% _a	20.3% _b
	Far-right (8-10)	10.1% _a	13.5% _b	14.3% _b
	Mean	4.7 _a	4.7 _a	4.9 _b
EU Enlarged	Far-left (0-2)	10.9% _a	9.8% _b	14.5% _c
	Left (3-4)	15.9% _a	13.8% _b	15.4% _a
	Center	33.7% _a	33.2% _a	27.2% _b
	Right (6-7)	19.2% _a	21.2% _b	16.7% _c
	Far-right (8-10)	20.3% _a	21.9% _b	26.2% _c
	Mean	5.4 _a	5.6 _b	5.5 _b
Kruskal-Wallis between		<0.001	<0.001	<0.001

Note: Values in the same row that do not share the same subscript are significantly different at $p < .05$ in the test of column proportions. Cells without subscripts are not included in the test. Tests assume equal variances. Source: Own elaboration.

4.4. Political Ideology, Social Trust, and Democratic Satisfaction

Social trust tends to vary significantly across ideological extremes, particularly on the far right, although with regional differences. In the EU Core and EU South, trust levels are higher among those on the left and in the center, whereas in the EU Enlarged group, the far right is associated with higher levels of trust.

Regarding democratic satisfaction, the patterns are more consistent: the extremes—particularly the far left—show lower satisfaction, while the right and far right report higher satisfaction levels, especially in the EU Enlarged group. These findings support Hypothesis H₃ by demonstrating significant differences based on ideological positioning (Kruskal-Wallis, $p < 0.001$).

The analysis of the relationship between ideological positioning and social trust reveals distinct patterns across regions. Aggregated data in Table 4 show that generalized trust tends to be lower at the ideological extremes, particularly on the far right. This trend is consistent with the hypothesis linking ideological polarization to an erosion of interpersonal trust, and it manifests clearly across the three periods analyzed.

In the EU Core countries, between Rounds 1 and 10 (2002–2020), the highest GTRUST scores are found among those in the moderate right group (6–7). In Round 11 (2023/24), trust levels increase at both ends of the spectrum—left and right (means of 5.78 and 5.72, respectively)—while dropping to 5.35 at the far right. The center maintains slightly lower scores (5.41), suggesting a shift toward the poles that does not automatically translate into lower trust levels. In the EU South group, social trust is consistently higher among those on the left, particularly the far left (5.02 in R11), while the lowest values are repeatedly found in the far-right segment (4.82 in R11 and 4.9 in R1–5). The center also shows lower scores compared to the moderate ideological segments. In the EU Enlarged group, the pattern diverges from the rest: social trust is lowest on the far left (4.11 in R7–10; 4.58 in R11) and peaks among the right and far right (5.02 and 5.42 in R11). This is the only group where a clear positive association is observed between right-wing positioning and higher levels of social trust.

These findings confirm that the relationship between ideology and trust is not homogeneous but shows strong regional variation. Moreover, they support two complementary conclusions: (1) political ideology influences social trust, but in ways that differ by region and time period; and (2) differences between country groups exceed ideological differences within countries. The exception may be the EU Enlarged group, where the association between ideology and trust appears more pronounced.

Regarding H₃, the results confirm that ideological extremes are associated with distinct levels of social trust. However, the magnitude and direction of these differences vary substantially between regions. Thus, while the existence of an ideological effect is confirmed, its expression is not uniform, suggesting that political and cultural context modulates the impact of ideological polarization on trust. The case of the ideological center deserves further analysis. In all three country groups, social trust in the center remains at intermediate levels, without a clear pattern of improvement or decline. This may reflect the center's internal heterogeneity or its progressive erosion in favor of more polarized positions.

In terms of democratic satisfaction (STFDEM), differences across ideological categories are statistically significant both within and between country groups (Kruskal-Wallis, $p < 0.001$). However, the patterns vary considerably. In the EU Core group, during the early rounds (R1–5 and R7–10), satisfaction levels are highest among those on the right and far right (5.77 and 5.89), while the far left reports the lowest levels (4.49 and 4.92). In the most recent period (R11), this dissatisfaction also extends to the far right (5.42), suggesting a convergence of discontent regarding the functioning of democracy.

In the Southern European countries, a similar pattern is observed in R1–5 and R7–10, where satisfaction levels are lower at the extremes—particularly among the far left—while in R11, the center registers the lowest score (4.72). This may indicate a shift of discontent toward more moderate segments. For the EU Enlarged countries, the pattern is more pronounced: across all three periods, the highest satisfaction levels are consistently observed among the right and far right (5.48 and 5.57 in R7–10; 5.42 in R11), while the lowest values are systematically found among the far left (4.01, 3.56, and 3.76).

In sum, the data suggest that the relationship between ideology and satisfaction with democracy is more consistent and pronounced than in the case of social trust, indicating a greater degree of ideological polarization in citizens' evaluations of the democratic system.

Table 4. Evolution of GTRUST and STFDEM by Political Ideology: Mean Scores of GTRUST and STFDEM for Each IDPOL Category, 2002–2023/24

ROUNDS	IDPOL	Regional Groups							
		UE Center		UE South		UE Enlarged		Between all Countries	
		GTRUST Mean	STFDEM Mean	GTRUST Mean	STFDEM Mean	GTRUST Mean	STFDEM Mean	GTRUST Kruskal-Wallis	STFDEM Kruskal-Wallis
2002-2010 (R1-5)	Far-left (0-2)	5.2	*4.49	4.8	*4.73	*3.9	*4.01	Total n=86052	Total n=86108
	Left (3-4)	5.41	5.28	4.78	5.33	4.25	4.36	Df 4	Df 4
	Center	*5.15	5.03	*4.6	5.14	4.17	4.24	<0.001	<0.001
	Right (6-7)	5.52	5.77	4.81	5.39	4.41	4.77		
	Far-right (8-10)	5.35	5.68	*4.59	5.58	4.43	4.88		
	Kruskal-Wallis (p)	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001		
2014-2020 (R7-10)	Far-left (0-2)	5.61	*4.92	4.81	*4.51	*4.11	*3.56	Total n=80136	Total n=80154
	Left (3-4)	5.75	5.6	4.89	4.94	4.47	4.55	Df 4	Df 4
	Center	*5.37	5.21	4.69	4.67	4.31	4.46	<0.001	<0.001
	Right (6-7)	5.71	5.89	4.83	5.24	4.85	5.48		
	Far-right (8-10)	5.53	5.54	*4.58	5.02	4.52	5.57		
	Kruskal-Wallis (p)	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001		
2023/24 (R11)	Far-left (0-2)	5.71	*4.64	5.02	4.72	*4.58	*3.76	Total n=26753	Total n=26759
	Left (3-4)	5.78	5.45	4.97	4.88	4.78	4.47	Df 4	Df 4
	Center	5.41	5.01	4.77	*4.64	4.65	4.72	<0.001	<0.001
	Right (6-7)	5.72	5.56	4.82	5.27	5.02	5.42		
	Far-right (8-10)	*5.26	*4.65	*4.47	4.91	4.81	6.23		
	Kruskal-Wallis (p)	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001		
Total 2002-2024	Kruskal-Wallis (p)	<0.001	<0.001	0.031	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	n=192941 df 4 <0.001	n=193021 df 4 <0.001

Note: the asterisk (*) indicates the lowest mean values. Df=degrees of freedom.

Source: Own elaboration.

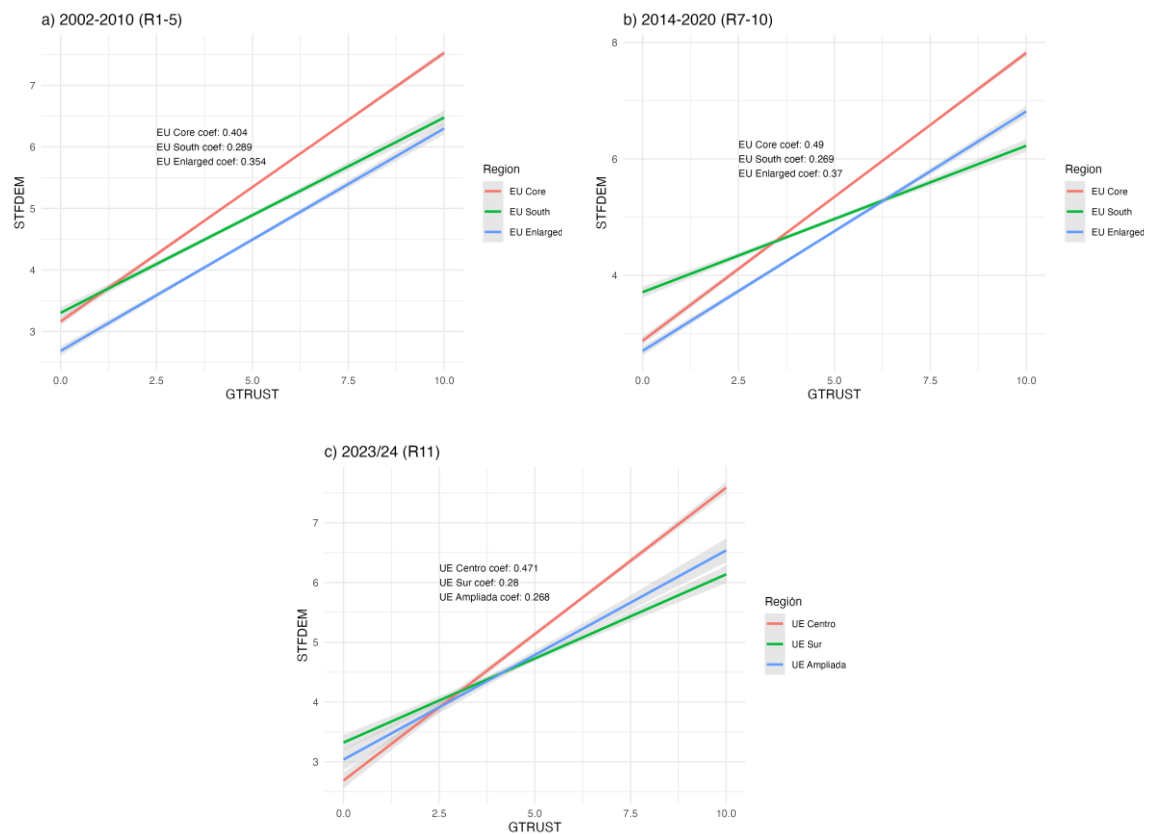
The findings related to satisfaction with democracy further support H₃, showing that ideological extremes display distinct patterns in their evaluation of democratic functioning. Unlike the case of social trust, this relationship is clearer and more consistent—particularly in the EU Enlarged group, where the far right systematically reports the highest levels of satisfaction. However, the results also indicate that the effects of ideological polarization on satisfaction vary depending on the political and historical context of each country group, suggesting that the interaction between ideological structure and institutional perception would require context-specific political and social analysis.

These findings justify a focused análisis in the following section, which examines the relationship between GTRUST and STFDEM from a comparative and longitudinal perspective, aiming to better understand the factors linking social trust to democratic support

4.5. Relationship Between Generalized Social Trust and Satisfaction with Democracy

Across the three periods analyzed, the relationship between generalized social trust (GTRUST) and satisfaction with democracy (STFDEM) remains positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), confirming H₄. The results presented in Table 5 and Figure 1 (a–c) reveal substantial regional differences and a temporal evolution that reflects the institutional and social transformations of the European context.

Figure 1. Regression results by country group and period (ESS 2002–2024)



Source. Own elaboration.

The EU Core consistently displays the highest coefficients ($B = 0.404 \rightarrow 0.490 \rightarrow 0.471$), suggesting that interpersonal trust functions as a structural component of democratic legitimacy. This pattern aligns with Rothstein and Uslaner (2005), who argue that societies with stable institutions, lower perceived corruption, and universal welfare regimes tend to reproduce virtuous circles of trust and democratic effectiveness.

In contrast, the Southern European countries maintain lower and more stable coefficients ($B \approx 0.27\text{--}0.28$). This weaker association may be linked to factors such as the impact of the economic crisis, political disaffection, or institutional weakness, which, according to Norris (2022) and Mewes (2024), constrain the integrative role of social trust in democratic legitimacy. In these contexts, trust remains relevant but is mediated by perceptions of inequality and the lower effectiveness of public institutions.

The EU Enlarged countries, in turn, show an intermediate pattern during the first two periods, followed by a slight decline in the most recent round ($B = 0.354 \rightarrow 0.370 \rightarrow 0.268$). This pattern, also visible in Figure 1c, may reflect an initial phase of democratic consolidation followed by increasing political polarization or a deterioration of institutional trust, consistent with the findings of Berdea and Mihei (2014). In these cases, the relationship between social trust and democratic satisfaction appears more sensitive to contextual factors such as government quality or economic performance.

Table 5. Linear Regression by Country Group and Period (ESS 2002–2024)

Periods	Regional groups	B	Std. B	CI 95% lowest	IC 95% highest	p-value
2002-2010	UE Center	0.404	0.292	0.393	0.415	< .001
	UE South	0.289	0.224	0.270	0.308	< .001
	UE Enlarged	0.354	0.287	0.338	0.371	< .001
2014-2020	UE Center	0.490	0.331	0.477	0.502	< .001
	UE South	0.269	0.206	0.250	0.288	< .001
	UE Enlarged	0.370	0.290	0.354	0.386	< .001
2023-2024	UE Center	0.471	0.306	0.448	0.493	< .001
	UE South	0.280	0.225	0.254	0.305	< .001
	UE Enlarged	0.268	0.201	0.231	0.304	< .001

Note: B = unstandardized coefficient; Std. B = standardized coefficient; CI = 95% confidence interval. Coefficients are weighted using ANWEIGHT.

Source. Own elaboration.

Overall, the increase of the effect in the core block and its stability or decline in the other two contexts suggest that institutional robustness and socioeconomic equality are conditions that strengthen the link between social trust and democratic satisfaction. This result reinforces the arguments of Putnam (2020) and the OECD (2022) on the importance of social capital as a foundation for democratic legitimacy and institutional resilience.

6. Discussion

The results of this study offer a more nuanced perspective on claims pointing to a generalized decline in social trust across Europe. Rather than a uniform downturn, the data reveal differentiated trajectories by region: stability in the EU Core, improvement in the EU Enlarged group, and a slight increase in the South. These differences reinforce the idea that trust levels are deeply shaped by historical, institutional, and cultural factors, as emphasized by Putnam (1993) and Rothstein and Uslaner (2005).

Regarding the link between political ideology and trust, the analysis confirms that ideological extremes tend to be associated with lower levels of interpersonal trust and democratic satisfaction. However, this pattern is reversed in the EU Enlarged group, where the right and especially the far right exhibit the highest levels of trust and satisfaction. This particularly relevant finding suggests that ideological orientation takes on different meanings depending on the context: while in the EU Core and South, extremes may indicate political disaffection

or rejection of the system, in the East they may reflect alignment with conservative governments or perceptions of stability. These results reinforce the need to account for the political and historical context when interpreting the effects of polarization, consistent with recent research on affective polarization and political identity (Mason, 2018; Iyengar *et al.*, 2019a).

Moreover, the relationship between social trust and democratic satisfaction is confirmed as significant across all regions, although with varying degrees of strength. The link is more robust and persistent in the EU Core, while greater variability is observed in the EU South and EU Enlarged groups –possibly reflecting institutional crises, inequality, or political transformations, particularly polarization. These results support the idea that interpersonal trust is not merely an individual moral resource (Uslaner, 2002), but also a socially contingent outcome shaped by political polarization and the discourses that define who is perceived as a legitimate member of the political community. Consequently, the rise in affective polarization –hostility toward those with opposing views –may erode trust and, in turn, democratic legitimacy, especially where political discourse reconfigures notions of inclusion and exclusion (Iyengar *et al.*, 2019b; Mason, 2018; Torcal and Comellas, 2022; Torcal, 2023).

This study also presents several limitations. The repeated but cross-sectional nature of ESS surveys allows for the identification of population-level trends, but not individual-level change or direct causal mechanisms. Furthermore, additional contextual variables –such as inequality, civil liberties, or national levels of corruption– could enhance the interpretation of the findings. These limitations point to promising directions for future research, particularly through longitudinal or multilevel approaches.

These results are consistent with the findings of Mewes (2024), who highlights the importance of welfare state design in sustaining social trust in Europe. Beyond economic differences between regions, patterns of trust appear to be deeply rooted in social and institutional structures. In line with Olivera (2015), regional differences in trust cannot be explained solely by economic inequality. When country-specific effects are controlled for, inequality loses much of its explanatory power, while factors such as ethnic and linguistic fragmentation, discrimination, and crime rates show a more stable influence on social trust. These findings underscore the importance of incorporating cultural and institutional dimensions into the analysis of democratic cohesion in Europe.

This study presents several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the use of repeated cross-sectional ESS data makes it possible to observe population trends but not to infer individual changes or direct causal relationships. Second, the grouping of countries into three regional blocs facilitates structural comparison but may conceal specific national dynamics; nonetheless, this strategy is suitable for identifying long-term regional patterns. Third, the recoding of political ideology into five categories –although practical for comparative analysis– simplifies the heterogeneity of the ideological center. Future research should explore alternative coding schemes or continuous scaling to test the robustness of the results under different classification frameworks. Finally, the absence of macro-contextual variables, such as inequality, corruption, or institutional quality, limits the ability to test broader causal hypotheses.

7. Conclusions

This study has undertaken a comparative analysis of the evolution of generalized social trust (GTRUST) and satisfaction with democracy (STFDEM) in Europe between 2002 and 2024, drawing on data from the European Social Survey. The central research questions focused on three dimensions: the temporal and regional evolution of both indicators; the influence of political ideology, with particular attention to the extremes; and the relationship between social trust and citizens' evaluations of the democratic system.

With respect to the first dimension –temporal evolution– the findings reveal no generalized decline in trust or democratic satisfaction. Instead, regionally differentiated trajectories emerge: stability in the EU Core, an upward trend in the EU Enlarged group, and a more contained evolution in the South. These differences support the hypothesis that institutional and political context strongly shapes levels of trust (H_1 and H_2).

In relation to the ideological dimension, the study confirms that ideological extremes tend to exhibit lower levels of trust and democratic satisfaction, although with notable regional variations. A particularly salient case is the EU Enlarged group, where the right and far right report the highest levels of trust and satisfaction, in contrast to the patterns observed in other regions. This finding calls for a reconsideration of ideological

categories from a context-sensitive perspective and suggests that polarization may have differentiated impacts depending on the political and historical environment (H₃).

The main contribution of this study is that the evidence confirms that social trust predicts satisfaction with democracy across all the contexts analyzed, with greater intensity in the European Core countries (H₄). This relationship, weaker in the South and more variable in the East, reinforces the idea that democratic legitimacy is built upon a solid relational foundation, yet one that remains sensitive to polarization and institutional disaffection. The evidence suggests that social capital –understood as a network of interpersonal trust and civic cooperation– functions as a stabilizing mechanism of democratic satisfaction, particularly in more institutionally robust environments.

Despite its contributions, the study presents certain methodological limitations, such as its cross-sectional design, the regional aggregation of countries, and the absence of other contextual variables at both the micro and macro levels. These constraints limit the ability to provide a comprehensive explanation or identify potential causal relationships. Future studies should address these limitations through longitudinal or multilevel models that allow for the inclusion of factors such as inequality, corruption, or institutional performance.

In terms of public policy, the results suggest prioritizing universal welfare interventions, programs aimed at institutional integrity and effectiveness, and efforts to mitigate ideological polarization –which today represents one of the main risks to democratic cohesion in Europe– in order to sustain democratic satisfaction through social trust.

References

- Berteau, P. E., & Mihei, A. (2014). Social Trust: Differences and Similarities between Eastern European Countries. In *Proceedings of the International Conference EURINT 2014* (pp. 29-37). Centre for European Studies, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi. http://cse.uaic.ro/eurint/proceedings/index_htm_files/EURINT2014_BER.pdf
- Duckitt, J., & Sibley, C. G. (2010). Personality, ideology, prejudice, and politics: A dual-process motivational model. *Journal of Personality, 78*(6), 1861–1894.
- Glatz, C., & Eder, A. (2020). Patterns of trust and subjective well-being across Europe: New insights from repeated cross-sectional analyses based on the European Social Survey 2002–2016. *Social Indicators Research, 148*(2), 417–439. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-019-02212-x>
- Glatz, C., & Schwerdtfeger, A. (2022). Disentangling the causal structure between social trust, institutional trust, and subjective well-being. *Social Indicators Research, 163*(3), 1323–1348. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-022-02914-9>
- Goubin, S., y Hooghe, M. (2020). The effect of inequality on the relation between socioeconomic stratification and political trust in Europe. *Social Justice Research, 33*(2), 219–247. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11211-020-00350-z>
- Hardin, R. (2002). *Trust and trustworthiness*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Inglehart, R., & Welzel, C. (2010). Changing mass priorities: The link between modernization and democracy. *Perspectives on Politics, 8*(2), 551–567. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592710001258>
- Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N., & Westwood, S. J. (2019a). The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States. *Annual Review of Political Science, 22*, 129–146
- Iyengar, S., Sood, G., & Lelkes, Y. (2019b). Affect, not ideology: A social identity perspective on polarization. *American Journal of Political Science, 63*(3), 490–506.
- Kaminska, O. (2020). Guide to using weights and sample design indicators with ESS data. *European Social Survey*. https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/ESS_weighting_data_1_1.pdf
- Levi, M., & Stoker, L. (2000). Political trust and trustworthiness. *Annual Review of Political Science, 3*(1), 475–507. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.3.1.475>
- Mason, L. (2018). *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. University of Chicago Press.
- Mewes, J. (2024). Welfare-state selectivity, universality, and social trust in Europe, 2002–2019: Bringing deservingness back in. *Journal of European Social Policy, 34*(1), 20–35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09589287231217377>
- Murtin, F., Fleischer, L., Siegerink, V., & Algan, Y. (2018). *Trust and its determinants: Evidence from the Trustlab experiment* (OECD Statistics Working Papers, No. 2018/02). OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/869ef2ec-en>

- Newton, K. (2001). Trust, social capital, civil society, and democracy. *International Political Science Review*, 22(2), 201–214. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512101222004>
- Norris, P. (2022). *In praise of skepticism: Trust but verify*. Oxford University Press.
- OECD. (2022). *Generar confianza para fortalecer la democracia*. Organización para la Cooperación y el Desarrollo Económicos. https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/support-materials/2022/07/building-trust-to-reinforce-democracy_1a87cc66/oecd-trust-survey-main-findings-es.pdf
- Olivera, J. (2015). Changes in inequality and generalized trust in Europe. *Social Indicators Research*, 124(1), 21–41. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-014-0777-5>
- Putnam, R. (1993). *Making democracy work: Civic traditions in modern Italy*. Princeton University Press.
- Putnam, R. (2020). *The upswift: how America came together a century ago and how we can do it again*. Simon & Schuster.
- Rapolienė, G., & Aartsen, M. (2022). Lonely societies: low trust societies? Further explanations for national variations in loneliness among older Europeans. *European Journal of Ageing*, 19(3), 485–494. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10433-021-00649-z>
- Reeskens, T., & Hooghe, M. (2008). Cross-cultural measurement equivalence of generalized trust: Evidence from the European Social Survey (2002 and 2004). *Social Indicators Research*, 85(3), 515–532.
- Robbins, B. G. (2012). Institutional quality and generalized trust: A nonrecursive causal model. *Social Indicators Research*, 107(2), 235–258.
- Rothstein, B., & Uslaner, E. M. (2005). All for all: Equality, corruption, and social trust. *World Politics*, 58(1), 41–72. <https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.2006.0022>
- Sarracino, F., & Mikucka, M. (2017). Social capital in Europe from 1990 to 2012: Trends and convergence. *Social Indicators Research*, 131(2), 407–432. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-016-1255-z>
- Scholz, E., & Zuell, C. (2016). Methodological aspects of central left-right scale placement in a cross-national perspective. *Bulletin of Sociological Methodology*, 132(1), 44–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0759106316662588>
- Seligson, M. A. (2002). The impact of corruption on regime legitimacy: A comparative study of four Latin American countries. *The Journal of Politics*, 64(2), 408–433. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2508.00132>
- Torcal, M. (2023). *De votantes a hooligans: La polarización política en España*. Los Libros de la Catarata.
- Torcal, M., & Comellas, J. M. (2022). Affective polarisation in times of political instability and conflict: Spain from a comparative perspective. *South European Society and Politics*, 27(1), 1–28.
- Uslaner, E. M. (2002). *The moral foundations of trust*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511614934>
- Uslaner, E. M. (Ed.) (2018). *The Oxford handbook of social and political trust*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190274801.001.0001>
- Wilkinson, R., & Pickett, K. (2009). *Desigualdad: Un análisis de la (in)felicidad colectiva*. Turner.
- Zmerli, S., & Newton, K. (2017). Objects of political and social trust: scales and hierarchies. In S. Zmerli, y T.W.G. van der Meer, (Eds.), *Handbook on Political Trust* (pp. 103–127). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Short CV of author

José A. López-Ruiz holds a PhD in Political Science and Sociology (UPSA, 2007) and a postgraduate degree in Applied Social Research and Data Analysis (CIS, 1994). He is a professor and researcher at Universidad Pontificia Comillas, where he has worked with the University Institute of Migration Studies, the Sociology Laboratory, and the Research and Social Studies Unit. He is currently an associate researcher at the Martín Patino Chair. His publications focus on social inclusion, public opinion, and youth. He is co-author of the Spanish Youth reports (2005, 2010, 2017) conducted in collaboration with Fundación SM.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data availability statement

The data used for this research are publicly available through the European Social Survey Data Portal: <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data-portal>. The R code used for the analysis is available upon request from the author.