



Has Trust in the European Parliament Polarized?

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Abstract

Scholars usually investigate how average levels of trust in institutions vary across countries and over time. Focusing on average levels, however, ignores distributional properties that might be equally relevant for institutional legitimacy and, more broadly, democratic stability. In this study, the authors investigate how the distribution of trust in the European Parliament has changed over time and across European Union member states. Drawing on pooled cross-sectional data from the European Social Survey for the period from 2002 to 2020, the authors find that confidence in the European Parliament has not only declined over time but also polarized as citizens have increasingly moved away from the “average citizen.” Furthermore, the authors find that trust has polarized, especially among the young versus the elderly and the employed versus the unemployed. These findings have implications for the legitimacy of European Union institutions.

Keywords

polarization, political polarization, European Parliament, trust

Declining trust in democratic institutions has been a common concern of researchers over the past few decades. Accumulating evidence indicates that on average, citizens' confidence has declined with respect not only to national governments (Dalton 2005; Hobolt and De Vries 2016; Jurado and León 2017; Norris 1999; Pharr 2000; Warren 1999:346–60) but also supranational institutions, such as the European Union (EU) (Armingeon and Ceka 2014; Armingeon and Guthmann 2014; Cramme and Hobolt 2014; Dotti Sani and Magistro 2016; Ehrmann, Soudan, and Stracca 2013; Roth, Nowak-Lehmann Danziger, and Otter 2013). If citizens lose confidence in fundamental democratic institutions across the board, the stability and legitimacy of democratic regimes are at risk. Yet what could also pose a potential threat to stability is a situation in which political trust polarizes, that is when citizens are moving increasingly “far apart” in their support for institutions. Polarized trust leads to conflict between different segments of the population, both over the legitimacy of an institution itself and also its policies. A recent example is compliance with anti–coronavirus disease 2019 measures (cf. Power et al. 2023), for which institutional trust was found to be one of the root causes. As trust is a determinant of (non) compliance, differences in institutional trust also lie at the root of conflicts between citizens on whether (or not) to follow those measures. Hence, in polarized settings, the dynamic is different from low-trust environments, as supporters who

trust and opponents who do not trust institutions are pitted against each other. Besides conflicts, this can also lead to a breakdown of communication between different camps.

Although research has commonly focused on changes in *average* levels of political trust (for a recent exception, see Hetherington and Rudolph 2015), the *distribution* of trust levels among citizens has received little scholarly attention, despite the relevant consequences that polarized (or nonpolarized) distributions might have for institutional legitimacy (but see Cook and Gronke 2005; Wu and Wilkes 2018).¹ A focus on polarization highlights the different distributions that may underlie average trust levels (later we explore both).

¹Other scholars have focused on differential patterns of political trust across groups of individuals (e.g., Norris 2011) or at different governmental levels, such as central versus local government (e.g., Li 2016).

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The polarization of trust might be problematic especially for a relatively “young” institution such as the EU, which needs to challenge a potential democratic deficit, as some scholars have argued (see, e.g., Follesdal and Hix 2006). In this study, we aim to fill this gap by focusing on how the distribution of trust in the European Parliament (EP) has changed over time and across countries.

We focus on the EP, a symbolic institution of the EU, both for a methodological reason, as it allows us to conduct a comparative analysis across several countries, and, most important, for a substantial reason, as we expect that the distribution of political trust has changed following the economic crisis of 2008 to 2009. Building on evidence by Dotti Sani and Magistro (2016) that the crisis has increased the gap between better-off and worse-off socioeconomic groups, we expect that trust in the EP has not only declined over time but also polarized, especially in peripheral EU member states that suffered the most from the consequences of the economic crisis. We therefore aim to address the following question: Has trust in the EP polarized over time, and if so, to what extent?

In addressing our descriptive research question, we contribute to the debate on how support for the EU has changed following the economic crisis. Although previous studies have investigated whether trust in the government has polarized in the United States (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015), to our knowledge, this is the first study to explore the polarization of trust in the EU across countries over time. By departing from a standard focus on mean values, we aim to encourage researchers to consider also distributional properties of trust indicators that might have equally relevant consequences for support for institutions and, ultimately, for democratic stability.

Trust in the EU and the Economic Crisis

Political trust is often defined as a truster’s expectation that a political actor will act in his or her interest (Levi and Stoker 2000). Following this notion, we conceive trust in European institutions as a citizen’s belief that he or she can rely on the beneficial actions of the EU (Armingeon and Ceka 2014:88).

Although the EU enjoyed a period of relatively stable support after the mid-1990s (Hix 2008:52), recent studies have shown that the average level of trust in European institutions has decreased across several countries over the past decade (e.g., Armingeon and Ceka 2014; Dotti Sani and Magistro 2016:255). Scholars argue that one of the reasons for this decline is the austerity policies that the EU imposed (in tandem with the International Monetary Fund) on several member states following the economic crisis (Ehrmann et al. 2013). According to Roth et al. (2013), a significant decline in trust in EU institutions occurred, especially in peripheral Eurozone countries—including Spain, Greece, Portugal, and Ireland—which experienced large increases in unemployment rates during the crisis.

According to another perspective, “support for the EU is derived from evaluations of national politics and policy, which Europeans know far better than the remote political system of the EU” (Armingeon and Ceka 2014:83). In this sense, confidence in European institutions is a function of evaluations of national-level institutions.² Thus, declining trust in the EU would be the consequence of citizens’ losing confidence in their national governments, which primarily took the blame for the economic crisis (see also Armingeon and Guthmann 2014).

Regardless of whether trust in European institutions should be considered as either a “first-order” or a “second-order” type of trust derived from national institutions, these studies suggest that following the economic crisis, trust in the EU might have also polarized if the loss of confidence occurred unevenly within the population of EU member states. Indeed, evidence from Dotti Sani and Magistro (2016) confirms that the gap in support for the EP between high and low social strata has widened since the economic crisis, especially among peripheral EU member states, namely, Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Cyprus, Greece, and Spain. The argument is that the crisis drove apart different segments of the population by worsening the conditions not of all European citizens indistinctly but mainly of the “losers” of globalization (Kriesi et al. 2012).

Although an investigation of overall levels of polarization is informative, we are still left with the question of *who* polarized. Here, we move to the conceptual notion of between-group polarization. Classic explanations of political trust rely on socioeconomic dimensions such as income and education. For instance, Dalton (2005) suggested that “increasing inequality in economic conditions may lead to a growing cynicism among those at the lower end of the social status ladder” (p. 139). Hence, we would expect that it is along those dimensions that individuals have polarized, especially in the wake of the crisis (i.e., that polarization occurs between individuals belonging to clusters of less and more privileged social strata).

Dotti Sani and Magistro (2016:260) identified four clusters of “less privileged social strata,” including the poorly educated, those with perceived lower levels of income, the unemployed and the retired, and the youth and the elderly.³ Although it seems reasonable to expect that the crisis affects citizens differently depending on the level of education, income, and work status, the role of age appears more

²This perspective is in line with evidence that trust in international institutions (Torgler 2008) or even in other nations (Brewer et al. 2004) is largely influenced by political trust in national institutions.

³Torcal (2014) suggested that an erosion of trust should not be attributed only to the economic crisis but might generally be due to citizens’ perception that European institutions are unresponsive to their demands. We can imagine that such perceptions are more common among socially disadvantaged citizens.

complicated. Although both young and elderly people suffered from the crisis in terms of job loss and austerity measures, including pension cuts, the youth also represent the generation that has grown up and been socialized into the EU (Grimm et al. 2018). Thus, we would expect trust in the EU to move toward opposite ends between the young and the elderly.

Last, it is likely that polarization of trust in the EU occurred also along ideological lines. Recent evidence indicates different patterns of skepticism in the EU depending on whether citizens identify as left-wing or right-wing (van Elsas and van der Brug 2015). Following the refugee crisis in 2015, it is mostly right-wing people who have developed anti-EU sentiments (e.g., Brosius, van Elsas, and de Vreese 2019; Hartevelde et al. 2018), thus we can expect left-wing and right-wing citizens to increasingly diverge in terms of their trust in European institutions. In the following, we provide descriptive evidence regarding polarization between groups of less privileged and more privileged strata of society—in relation to education, income, and work status—between the youth and the elderly as well as between left-wing and right-wing citizens. We also provide evidence on whether polarization is more pronounced in peripheral EU member states.

Conceptualizing and Measuring the Polarization of Trust

In a seminal article exploring whether public opinion polarized in the United States between the 1970s and the 1990s, DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson (1996) noted that “given polarization’s prominence in contemporary political discourse, the literature provides strikingly little guidance in defining it” (p. 692). Almost 30 years later, despite vast scholarly attention on the topic, the definition of polarization remains far from unequivocal (Lelkes 2016; Park 2018).

Broadly speaking, the level of polarization describes the degree to which individuals’ positions on one or several scales are separated. However, the nature of this separation (or distance) is still subject to debate, and scholars disagree on the extent to which different characteristics of a distribution reflect the idea of polarization. A key element is the “dispersion principle” (DiMaggio et al. 1996:693), according to which a necessary condition for polarization to occur over time is that the distribution of opinions along a scale becomes more dispersed. In the case of political trust, a distribution becomes more scattered as some individuals display increasingly higher or lower levels of trust over time, whereas others either do not change their mind or move in the opposite direction. Building on DiMaggio et al. (1996) and in line with recent studies of opinion polarization (Park 2018) and ideological polarization (Bischof and Wagner 2019), we use the

variance of a standard scale of trust in the EP, ranging from 0 to 10, as a proxy for overall polarization.⁴

Although it is a crude proxy for polarization, the variance has the advantage of being easy to interpret. As individuals display levels of trust that are increasingly distant from the sample’s mean, the value of variance (indicating the overall level of polarization) increases. As the distance is squared, those far from the mean carry more weight.⁵

Data and Models

We rely on data from 10 waves of the European Social Survey for the period from 2002 to 2020 (waves 1–10). We exclude countries that were not member of the EU at the time the surveys were conducted (such as Croatia) and countries for which we do not have at least two data points during or after the crisis in 2008 (such as Luxembourg). This leaves us with a total of 25 EU member states, as summarized in Table A7 in the Appendix.

To measure trust, we rely on a question that asks how much respondents personally trust the EP on a standard scale ranging from 0 (“no trust at all”) to 10 (“complete trust”) (for question wording, see Table A1). It is important not to “over-theorize” the actual responses to these scales, as individuals might answer on the basis of considerations that are at the “top of their head” when they are surveyed (Zaller 1992). Studies have shown that there is considerable variation in such general trust questions (Nannestad 2008). In other words, we assume that individual locations on the trust scale reflect a simplistic cognitive process and that answers on the scale may reflect a number of considerations that come to participants’ mind when they are asked the survey question.

We first calculate the variance of the trust scale for each country at each time point and regress it on a year variable to detect whether trust in the EP has polarized over time (in terms of increased variance). We repeat the same operation using the mean of trust to test whether the level of trust has declined in the same period. In a second step, we add an interaction between the year variable and a “periphery” indicator, taking the value of 1 if the country is from the peripheral area—including Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Cyprus, Greece and Spain—and a value of 0 otherwise.

⁴For a distribution to polarize, both dispersion and bimodality need to increase. However, the literature does not seem to offer a reliable measure of bimodality. Both the kurtosis and the bimodality coefficient, which have been proposed as possible measures, suffer from serious limitations (see, e.g., Park 2018:1778). For these reasons, we consider only the dimension of dispersion.

⁵In this sense, the variance is preferable to the standard deviation, because the standard deviation, being the square root of the variance, does not attribute disproportionately higher weight to extreme values.

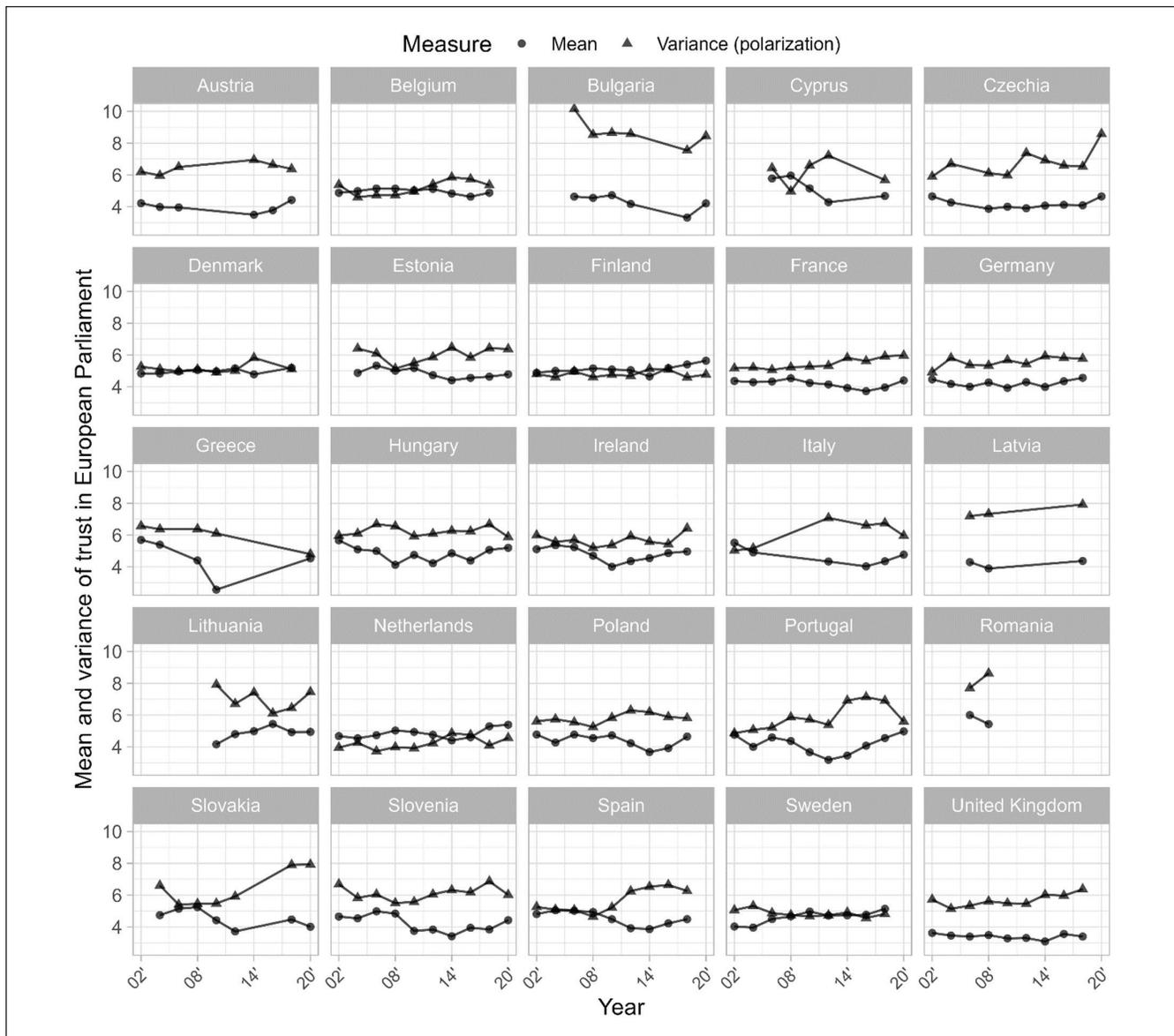


Figure 1. Overall polarization including trust in national parliament.

In alternative specifications, we rely on the weighted mean and variance (see Table A3), use a pre-post crisis indicator for the time variable (see Table A4), and control for gross domestic product growth, unemployment rate, and trust in national parliaments (see Tables A5 and A6).

Empirical Results

Figure 1 visualizes all data points underlying our analysis. For each country, we show changes over time for both the mean and the variance of trust to compare the two phenomena. As Figure 1 reveals, there is a significant variation across European countries regarding both average levels of

trust and variance.⁶ Furthermore, the analysis indicates that mean and variance tap into different dimensions not only conceptually but also empirically, as there is no systematic correlation across years.⁷ We can also observe that in some

⁶The y axis provides the values of both dimensions, but the underlying scales are different: the mean ranges from 0 to 10, whereas the variance ranges from 0 to a hypothetical maximum of 25, which would be reached in the case of a completely bipolar distribution in which half of the population has no trust in the EP (value of 0) and the other half has complete trust (value of 10).

⁷The Pearson correlations between the two lie at .17 (2002), .06 (2004), .13 (2006), -.24 (2008), -.17 (2010), -.26 (2012), -.29 (2014), -.47 (2016), -.61 (2018), and -.61 (2020).

Table 1. Changes in Trust in the EP Over Time.

	Outcome: Trust in the EP			
	Mean		Variance	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Year (0–18)	–.02** (.01)	–.01 (.01)	.03*** (.01)	.03*** (.01)
Periphery (0, 1)		.84*** (.24)		–.92** (.31)
Year × periphery		–.04** (.01)		.02 (.02)
Constant	4.10*** (.18)	4.04*** (.18)	6.16*** (.22)	6.20*** (.22)
Observations	195	195	195	195
R ²	.54	.56	.76	.77

Source: European Social Survey, 2002 to 2020.

Note: The models include country fixed effects. Time is rescaled so that year 2002 corresponds to value 0. EP = European Parliament.

** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

cases, such as Cyprus, Italy, Portugal, and Spain, the two dimensions move in opposite directions in the period after the crisis, thus indicating that trust in the EP did not decline uniformly within the populations of these countries.

In Table 1, we display the results from simple linear regression models in which we pooled together all our data points, controlling for country fixed effects. The results from model 1 confirm existing evidence that trust in the EP has declined over time—a decrease of about 0.02 points per year on a scale of 0 to 10 (Model 1). Moreover, the negative interaction in Model 2 indicates that the decline has taken place primarily in peripheral EU countries.

Models 3 and 4 reveal that in the same period, trust in the EP has also polarized. Model 3 shows that the distribution of trust has become more dispersed over time, as the variance of the responses to the trust question has increased from 2002 to 2020 (an increase of 0.03 points per year on a scale of 0–25). If we consider the entire period from 2002 to 2020, the variance of the responses to the trust question has increased by 2.2 percentage points (an increase of 0.54 points on a scale of 0–25). This finding shows that the overall level of polarization of trust in the EP has increased across Europe over time. This increase in polarization has taken place similarly in peripheral and nonperipheral countries, as the lack of a significant interaction in model 4 suggests.

When we run additional models using the weighted values of both mean and variance (see Table A3, models 15–18) and controlling for gross domestic product growth and unemployment rate (see Table A5, Models 23–26, and Table A6, models 27–30), we obtain similar results. Similar to previous research (Armingeon and Ceka 2014), the results partially hold when we control for trust in national parliaments, even if confidence in national parliaments and trust in the EP are strongly correlated (cf. Tables A5 and A6; see Figure A2 for a visual trend). Last, when we code the year variable as a pre-post crisis indicator, we find that both the decline in trust and the increase of polarization occurred in the period after the crisis (see Table A4, Models 19–22).

Between-Group Polarization

Next, we investigate whether trust in the EP has polarized as a result of different socioeconomic groups moving increasingly far apart. Following recent advances in the study of polarization (see Lelkes 2016; Levendusky and Pope 2011; Park 2018; Schmid and Schmidt 2006), we rely on the overlap coefficient as a measure of between-group polarization. The overlap coefficient indicates the degree of overlap or common ground between two groups in relation to the distribution of trust (see Appendix A.4 for detailed description).

Table 2 shows the results of regressions of overlap coefficients on time indicators by different group categories, pooling all available data points and controlling for country fixed effects. We find that the overlap between young and old people (Models 5 and 6), between rich and poor (Models 7 and 8), and between the employed and the unemployed (Models 9 and 10) regarding trust in the EP has decreased over time. In other words, polarization occurred along age lines, income categories, and work status categories.⁸ We do not find evidence that trust has polarized between citizens with low and high education (Models 11 and 12), while we find that left-wing and right-wing citizens have grown further apart in their trust in the EP (Model 13). The interaction models in Table 2 show that that the overlap between the employed and the unemployed has decreased especially in peripheral countries (Model 10), while we do not find statistically significant interactions for the other group categories. In the Appendix, we provide a visualization of trends of between-group polarization for each country, revealing substantial variation across countries (see Figure A3).

⁸When we compare people aged 18 to 35 years with those aged 36 to 64 years, we find a similar result, but not when we compare the latter with people aged 65 and older, thus indicating that it is mostly the young segment of the population that distanced itself from the rest in terms of trust (see Table A7).

Table 2. Changes in Between-Group Polarization (Overlap) over Time.

	Outcome: Overlap Coefficient													
	Age Groups			Income Groups			Work Groups			Education Groups			Ideological Groups	
	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10	Model 11	Model 12	Model 13	Model 14				
Year (0–14)	-.003*** (.0005)	-.003*** (.001)	-.001** (.0004)	-.002** (.001)	-.002*** (.0005)	-.003*** (.001)	.001 (.0005)	.0005 (.0005)	-.002** (.001)	-.001 (.001)				
Periphery (0, 1)		-.01 (.02)		-.03 (.02)		.003 (.02)		.04 (.03)		.02 (.03)				
Year × periphery	.0004 (.001)			.001 (.001)		.003** (.001)		.0004 (.001)		-.001 (.001)				
Constant	.91*** (.01)	.91*** (.01)	.93*** (.01)	.93*** (.01)	.90*** (.01)	.90*** (.01)	.87*** (.02)	.87*** (.02)	.92*** (.02)	.91*** (.02)				
Observations	195	195	193	193	195	195	162	162	195	195				
R ²	.63	.63	.39	.39	.52	.54	.51	.51	.43	.43				

Source: European Social Survey, 2002 to 2020.

Note: The models include country fixed effects. Time is rescaled so that year 2002 corresponds to value 0.

***p < 0.01. **p < 0.05. *p < 0.1.

Conclusion

Over the past few decades, scholars have raised concerns about a decline of trust in democratic institutions in different regions of the world. We provide novel evidence that since 2002, confidence in the EP has not only declined but also polarized. European citizens have moved increasingly further apart in their support for the EP over time. Although we do not test causal explanations, we argue that one of the possible reasons underlying this polarizing trend concerns the economic crisis, which has increased the gap between different socioeconomic segments of the population (Cramme and Hobolt 2014; Dotti Sani and Magistro 2016). We also find that trust has polarized especially between the employed versus the unemployed and between the young versus the elderly. The latter finding resonates with a recent analysis of the Brexit referendum, in which attitudes toward the EU markedly diverged between younger and older segments of the population (Norris and Inglehart 2019). They highlight a generational cleavage in support for EU institutions that deserves more scholarly attention.

It is important to underline two limitations of our analysis. First, our measure of overall polarization provides only a proxy for polarization, as it does not fully capture the dimension of bimodality. As far as we are aware, there are no available measures that satisfactorily capture both dispersion and bimodality (Park 2018). We therefore urge scholarly attempts to develop a more refined measure of polarization that combines both dimensions in one single indicator. Second, our analysis relies on pooled cross-sectional data, as no cross-country panel data are available to study our questions. Thus, it might be that some of the differences we find may result from slightly different sample compositions over time.

Despite these limitations, our findings have relevant implications for the legitimacy of the EP and, more broadly, the EU. If such a polarizing trend continues in the future, EU institutions might find it increasingly challenging to harness support among European citizens, while political conflict may arise because of opposing views between different socioeconomic groups. From a normative perspective, if the aim is to maintain a healthy degree of support for EU institutions, European elites should attempt not only to reverse the current trend of declining trust in EU institutions but also to close the gaps between the youth and the elderly and between better-off and worse-off social strata.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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