

Political Trust, Poverty and Welfare Receipt

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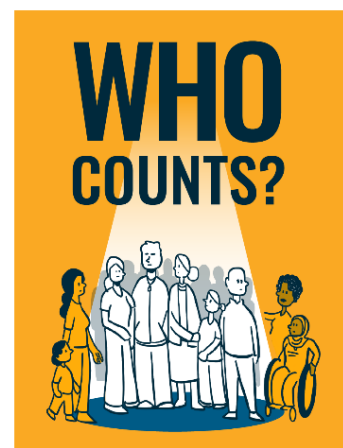


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Political Trust, Poverty and Welfare Receipt.

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Abstract

Existing research highlights the importance of the quality of contact with welfare state services in fostering political trust and, in turn, political participation. However, less attention has been paid to how these dynamics unfold for the most economically disadvantaged: individuals who are most exposed to and dependent on government action but, somewhat paradoxically, often have less political power and influence. In response, this paper draws on cross-sectional data from a unique EU-SILC module to examine the relationship between poverty and political trust, and how this is affected by receiving different types of welfare. Rather than simply distinguishing between ‘the poor’ and ‘non-poor’, we differentiate between varying degrees of poverty (drawing on both indirect and direct measures), allowing for a more nuanced analysis of effects. Our analyses show that, individuals in the most vulnerable economic situations exhibit lower levels of political trust, and the same is true for those receiving social exclusion-related benefits, but not those receiving other forms of assistance who exhibit higher levels of political trust. We discuss these results in terms of gaps in welfare coverage and adequacy, as well as factors affecting welfare state engagement, such as administrative burden. These findings are particularly relevant given the low levels of political participation among people in poverty and the role of trust in shaping democratic engagement. They suggest the existence of a potentially vicious cycle: insufficient and burdensome welfare benefits undermine recipients’ political trust, which in turn reduces political engagement and voice—ultimately reinforcing social and political exclusion.

Keywords: Political trust, Poverty, Welfare receipt, Material deprivation,

Introduction

While political trust is shaped by a range of factors, socioeconomic status plays a crucial role in explaining its distribution. Both higher social class and socioeconomic status have been shown to positively predict political and institutional trust (Boda & Medve-Bálint, 2014; Goubin & Hooghe, 2020; Torcal, 2014). So far, less attention has been paid to the specific role of experiencing poverty. This is despite the fact that an acute lack of resources entails direct experiences of unmet basic needs, potentially increasing perceptions of governmental neglect and institutional failure that are not fully captured by broader SES measures. This paper addresses this gap by analyzing the relationship between socioeconomic categories and political trust in Europe and also analyzing the role of the welfare receipt in this relationship.

There are several compelling reasons to focus the analysis on individuals with fewer resources. An institution has political legitimacy to the extent that it is justified in exercising political power (Buchanan, 2002). In representative democracies, one key source of legitimacy is the degree of inclusion and participation in electoral processes and other forms of institutional political engagement (Easton, 1965). However, we know that individuals with fewer resources are, in many ways, 'excluded' from this political process (Armingeon & Schädel, 2015). Generally, people with fewer socioeconomic resources or those living in more deprived contexts tend to engage less in various forms of political activity (Laurison, 2016; Michener, 2013; Mood & Jonsson, 2016). Several factors explain this lack of participation: lower political interest, weaker commitment to voting, reduced feelings of personal efficacy, a diminished sense of collective capacity, and lower perceived government responsiveness (Desmond & Travis, 2018; Laurison, 2016; Scott & Acock, 1979).

On paper, one of the foundational pillars of the welfare state is the social and political inclusion of disadvantaged populations through social protection. Ideally, social support policies targeting individuals with fewer resources should improve their material conditions in ways that help overcome the obstacles associated with deprivation, enabling them to participate fully both socially and politically. However, there is considerable evidence to suggest social policies targeting the most disadvantaged often fall short in terms of both coverage and adequacy (Almeida et al., 2022; Figari et al., 2013; Nelson, 2013). Even when certain policies and programs succeed in improving individuals' material conditions, they may still be insufficient to foster greater political engagement (Elder et al., 2024). This may trigger a feedback loop in which the most vulnerable and excluded individuals are insufficiently supported by the state, leaving them politically marginalized and without a voice in the decision-making process. As we argue below, political trust may play a key role in this relationship.

Here, we analyze the effects of belonging to different socioeconomic categories, receipt of different types of welfare, and their interaction on political trust. Beyond the typical income-based indicators, we include a material deprivation measure and finer categorizations (e.g., no poverty, shallow poverty, and deep poverty) to offer a more nuanced perspective. For our analyses, we use cross-sectional microdata from the 2013 European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), which includes a particularly valuable module on well-being with several questions on political trust. We find that individuals experiencing higher levels of deprivation—both income-based and material—report lower levels of political trust, with the effect being stronger when material deprivation is considered. Additionally, individuals receiving welfare benefits, particularly those receiving social exclusion-related benefits, display

lower levels of political trust. Finally, we observe an interaction effect: individuals in the most severe forms of poverty who receive social exclusion-related welfare report the lowest levels of political trust. These findings have important implications for understanding how welfare state design and the experience of interacting with social protection systems can either reinforce political trust for the economically advantaged via their engagement with welfare services and transfers, or undermine political trust among the most vulnerable populations reliant on social-exclusion related benefits. While welfare state contact is supposed to foster social cohesion and political trust, our findings suggest it does the opposite. For those most reliant on welfare state support, services and institutions, this proves particularly problematic.

Political trust and socioeconomic status

Trust in the institutional and political environment in which individuals live has significant implications for the quality of life and the development of both individuals and the communities they belong to. Individuals with higher levels of institutional trust are more predisposed to engage and actively participate in institutional activities (e.g., party membership) or to vote in elections (Dalton, 2004; Hooghe and Marien, 2013; Kim, 2014). The lack of political trust impacts citizens' willingness to cooperate with the government and adhere to government regulations (Grimes, 2006; Marien & Hooghe, 2011). This phenomenon not only complicates the implementation of public policies but could also lead to significant long-term economic and social costs (Hwang, 2017). For instance, in extreme situations such as the Covid-19 pandemic, political trust is closely linked to adherence to the directives of public authorities (Bargain & Aminjonov, 2020; Pak et al., 2021), though other studies indicate that its effect is more modest (Clark et al., 2020; Jørgensen et al., 2020). In a recent meta-analysis, Devine (2024) demonstrated that political trust has a small-to-moderate effect size on both

engagement with institutional forms of political participation and political preferences (e.g., regarding immigration, public spending, or environmental policies).

Given the importance of political trust for political and social life, it is unsurprising that a considerable body of research has focused on examining its determinants. Several macro-level factors have been identified as influencing institutional or political trust, including corruption, the electoral system, and the type of former regime (Van der Meer, 2010), or cultural factors such as the power distance (Kaasa & Andriani, 2022). At the micro level, socioeconomic status is one of the most extensively studied factors affecting institutional trust. In general, studies indicate that the higher the socioeconomic status, the greater the political trust. This pattern is observed whether income, educational attainment, occupation or subjective socioeconomic status is used, as well as when a composite index of income, education, and occupation is applied (Boda & Medve-Bálint, 2014; Bornand & Klein, 2022; Foster & Frieden, 2016; Goubin & Hooghe, 2020; van Erkel & van der Meer, 2016; Zmerli & Castillo, 2015; but see also Kim et al., 2022).

Various explanations have been proposed for the positive relationship between socioeconomic status, or its components, and political trust. For instance, higher status may be related to socialization into democratic values, or social capital may play a role (Bornand & Klein, 2022). Since the main interest of the article concerns the material living condition of individuals, we take a utilitarian perspective. We assume that individuals' trust in the political system is heavily influenced by their material interests, without disregarding the role of other background factors such as culture or ideas. Crucially, trust is shaped by individuals' contact with institutions and their perceptions of how these institutions function. For example, Schoon and Chen (2011) used longitudinal data to show that political trust is shaped by experiences with societal

institutions (e.g., the educational and economic systems). As we will discuss further, experiences with the welfare system and social protection policies are the second central focus of this study.

All the aforementioned studies have made significant contributions to understanding the relationship between socioeconomic status and political trust. However, most of them have treated income, for instance, as a continuous variable. In this study, we also aim to deepen our understanding of this relationship by using different poverty categories (e.g., deep poverty, shallow poverty, and no poverty). This approach offers several advantages. First, it allows us to refine the analysis of these effects on the most vulnerable populations (e.g., those in deep poverty), where changes in resources can result in significant differences in political trust, thus capturing the specific political-trust implications (varying degrees) of poverty. Second, this approach seems particularly well-suited for public policy design, as it examines whether certain policies affect trust differently across groups, providing insights for targeted intervention strategies—using the commonly employed relative poverty thresholds to measure national poverty rates, which can also serve as benchmarks for determining eligibility criteria for last-resort assistance, for example.

Taking it a step further, we go beyond income-based categories by also incorporating material deprivation indices, offering a broader and richer perspective to understand the relationship between social position and political trust. Income-based poverty indicators provide relevant information about individuals' consumption possibilities, but they may not accurately capture living conditions or access to basic goods—more tangible aspects of poverty. It would not be surprising to find different effects depending on which indicator is used. For example, previous research has shown that early-life material deprivation influences later political behaviour (Jungkunz &

Marx, 2024), whereas this is less true for current changes in income (Jungkunz & Marx, 2022). A similar pattern could be expected in the context of political trust, where different measures of poverty and material deprivation—and their interaction with the welfare receipt—may lead to different outcomes.

The role of welfare receipt

The term 'social assistance' does not have a universal or unequivocal meaning across all countries. The purpose of social assistance, the method of administration, the target of the aid, eligibility criteria, and other aspects can vary significantly from one country to another.

In European welfare states, the majority of social protection expenditure is allocated to healthcare, pensions, family benefits, and disability support, while expenditure aimed at combating social exclusion remains one of the most underfunded areas (Eurostat, 2023). Generally, in the EU, these “last-resort” benefits, aimed at individuals facing exclusion or vulnerability, are means-tested, requiring income and situational verification to determine eligibility (Goedemé & Trindade, 2020). Social benefits designed for the most disadvantaged individuals are well-known to face issues such as access difficulties, bureaucratic hurdles, strict eligibility criteria, and the stigma associated with receiving aid (e.g., Baumberg, 2016; Janssens & van Mechelen, 2022). This is partly evidenced by the high rates of non-take-up of social benefits, which are especially high for mean-tested benefits (Marc et al., 2022). A useful illustration of the issues associated with receiving social benefits can be drawn from studying the factors influencing the non-take-up of such assistance. The literature on non-take-up suggests that it is a multifaceted phenomenon: the implementation of social benefit programs can be challenging, involving complex administrative procedures and a degree of discretion that increases uncertainty for claimants (van Oorschot, 1991; Eurofound, 2015; Janssens

& Van Mechelen, 2022; Goedemé et al., 2022). Added to this is the fact that those benefits, such as minimum income benefits, may be insufficient in quantitative terms to lift individuals out of poverty (Nelson, 2013). This may lead even those who receive these benefits to not trusting the political system, as they undergo a demanding, uncertain process with minimal or insufficient support. That is, some of the processes associated with non-take-up—though not all, of course—may help explain the lack of political trust among those who, in fact, receive such benefits.

The design, quality, and perceived performance of services provided by the welfare state have implications for other key aspects of social life, such as perceived social cohesion and generalized trust in others (Andrews & Jilke, 2016; Freitag & Buhlmann, 2009; Rothstein & Stolle, 2008). The same is true for political trust. A substantial body of empirical research has examined the relationship between welfare state performance across various dimensions and political trust. However, most of this research has approached the issue from the perspective of general public attitudes, and specially macroeconomic performance, without considering individuals' direct contact with different aspects of the welfare state (Erkel & van der Meer 2016; Friedrichsen & Zahn, 2014; Kroknes et al., 2015). When individuals perceive public institutions as unresponsive, unfair, or ineffective—particularly those meant to protect the most vulnerable—this may undermine not only political trust but also generalized trust in others and perceptions of social cohesion. This erosion of trust can lead to lower civic engagement, reduced compliance with social norms, and a weakening of the social fabric. In this sense, political trust functions as a bridge between state legitimacy and broader forms of societal integration.

Regarding specific social transfers receipt, several studies have explored the relationship between contact with various welfare state services and different outcomes.

Christensen and Lægreid (2005), based on a Norwegian sample, found that higher reported satisfaction with services such as social and healthcare services was associated with greater trust in government. Kumlin and Rothstein (2005), based on a Swedish sample, found that contact with universal institutions (e.g., child health care centers) increases social trust, while experiences with more selective programs that involve stricter access criteria, such as means-tested programs (e.g., social assistance or disability pensions), reduce social trust—understood as generalized trust in others. Similarly, studies have found that contact with institutions where discretion in decision-making or means-testing is limited—rather than prevalent—tends to foster greater perceptions of social justice and higher levels of political trust (Kumlin, 2004). Again, in Sweden, experimental studies have shown that positive experiences with services, in this case eldercare, translate into greater institutional trust, particularly when the provision is public (Berg & Johansson, 2020). Longitudinal evidence is limited; however, existing studies do provide some support for the link between positive evaluations of public services and institutional trust—in the cases of Germany and Norway (Kumlin et al., 2024). Some cross-national studies have focused on the evaluation of specific public services—such as education and healthcare—and have found that higher satisfaction with these services is associated with greater political trust. Moreover, this link appears to have strengthened in recent years (de Block et al., 2020). Haugsgjerd and Kumlin (2020) suggest that the relationship between evaluations of the welfare state and political trust is reciprocal: on the one hand, lower satisfaction with public services leads to reduced political trust, but on the other, lower political trust can also result in more negative evaluations of those same services. This feedback loop is particularly relevant to our interest in the relationship between poor welfare provision

for the most vulnerable, political distrust, and reduced political participation—which, in turn, may further contribute to weaker service provision, and so on.

These studies lead to several important conclusions: 1) contact with various public and welfare services plays a key role in institutional or political trust; 2) more positive contact results in greater institutional trust; and 3) universal services, in contrast to means-tested ones, are more effective in fostering trust. Broadly speaking, this can be understood from an utilitarian perspective: the better the services are perceived to be, the more effective or useful they are experienced, the greater the institutional and political trust. Considering this, along with earlier discussions on last-resort support systems, it can be inferred that for individuals living in poverty and receiving social assistance aimed at addressing social exclusion, such contact, if negative, may reduce trust in institutions. It is worth noting that these studies are either geographically limited in scope, focus on broader forms of trust (e.g., social trust), analyze other forms of public services and social provision (e.g., eldercare), or do not place socioeconomic status as a central focus, even if it is included as a control variable. Even more importantly, none of these studies examine the interaction between these factors and socioeconomic status or categories—an omission that may be particularly relevant in the context of welfare states, given our earlier argument about the relationship between status, political trust, and political participation. While this does not detract from their importance, it highlights the contribution of this study, which examines individuals across different types of poverty, explores the effect of the welfare receipt, and employs a cross-country sample. The use of multiple countries and a larger sample allows us to achieve several goals. On the one hand, it increases statistical power and precision. On the other, it can be seen as a layer of research that precedes—and supports—a series of future studies aimed at testing our findings in greater detail and with empirical breadth,

whether across different contexts or through case study approaches (Hemerijck et al., 2023).

Taking all the above into account, this paper aims to answer three questions: (1) What is the relationship between belonging to different socioeconomic categories and political trust? (2) How does receiving welfare-related assistance, as well as its type, impact political trust? (3) Is there an interaction between the type of assistance received and poverty category in explaining levels of political trust?

Data and Methods

Data

In this paper we use data from the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC). EU-SILC is a micro-level dataset that provides extensive information on income and other socioeconomic variables across numerous European countries, including information on the different types of social assistance individuals receive. Specifically, we used cross-sectional data from 2013. In that year, a special module on well-being was included, which contains, among other variables, our main dependent variable: trust in the political system. Crucially for our purposes, it also includes information on the different types of social assistance individuals receive. The final sample consists of 403,018 individual observations, nested within 111 regions from 26 countries (see the data treatment section for more details).

An important factor to consider is the year in which the survey was conducted and the potential impact of the 2008 economic crisis on our results. Several studies have highlighted that the economic crisis and subsequent austerity policies had a negative effect on trust in the political system—an effect that was particularly pronounced in countries most affected by both circumstances (Armingeon & Guthman, 2013; Torcal,

2014). While it is undeniable that the economic crisis likely had some effect, we believe that our findings are not solely driven by this factor. First, our sample includes a pool of countries that were affected by the crisis to varying degrees. Second, as a robustness check reported in the supplementary materials, we excluded from the analyses those countries with the lowest levels of political system trust. Third, we conducted an additional robustness check using an alternative index that includes institutions such as the police.

Indicators

Dependent Variable

Our key dependent variable is trust in the political system. Specifically, the EU-SILC 2013 well-being module includes three questions regarding trust in institutions. Participants were asked to indicate, on a scale from 0 (*No trust at all*) to 10 (*Complete trust*), the extent to which they trust the following institutions: the legal system, the political system, and the police. In the main analysis presented here we analyze the item measuring trust in political system. This question, as well as its response format, is very similar to those used in other major datasets such as the European Social Survey and the World Values Survey, both of which have been widely used in empirical research (e.g., Hooghe & Kern, 2015; Kumlin, 2007). Using a single-item measure introduces a set of challenges in terms of predictive validity, reliability and comparability. Therefore, as a robustness check, we repeated the main analyses using a composite measure that includes all three items.

Independent Variables

Socioeconomic categories. For poverty categories, we use three different operationalizations. First, based solely on income, we categorize individuals in shallow

poverty as those with an equivalized household income below 60% of the national median income and above 40%; in deep poverty as those below 40%; and as non-poor those with equivalized incomes above 60% of the national income mean. The equivalence scale used was the modified OECD equivalence scale. Second, we use material deprivation. Following previous studies (Guio et al., 2012, 2017), we categorize individuals with fewer than 5 deprivations out of a total of 13 as not experiencing material deprivation; those with more than 5 but fewer than 7 as experiencing material deprivation; and those with 7 or more deprivations as experiencing severe material deprivation. For the full list of items, readers can refer to Table S1 and Section 2 of the Supplementary Materials.

Welfare receipt. EU-SILC collects relevant information on various forms of welfare receipt, both at the household level (housing allowance, family-related allowances, social assistance) and the personal level (unemployment, old-age retirement, survivors' benefits, educational-related allowances, sickness, and disability). However, several considerations must be taken into account when using this data. Our analysis is based on gross annual amounts, as these are consistently reported across all countries, unlike net amounts. While this may overstate the impact of transfers on poverty, it remains suitable for our focus on administrative contact and receipt of benefits. In part, this limits our ability to conduct analyses based on the amount of social transfers received, rather than solely on whether individuals receive it or not—an approach that would allow us to go beyond mere contact with the welfare system. Several other issues with the data are worth noting: the annual reporting obscures variation in benefit regularity (e.g., pensions vs. short-term assistance; Otto, 2018); the 2013 EU-SILC data do not clearly distinguish means-tested or contributory benefits (Goedemé & Trindade, 2020); and the mix of individual- and household-level variables

complicates welfare receipt attribution. Additionally, policy classifications differ between countries, potentially distorting cross-national comparisons (Trindade & Goedemé, 2020). However, we are less concerned about these issues given the nature of our dependent variable—receipt or non-receipt—rather than the specific amount or type of welfare benefit. These issues are discussed in more detail in Supplementary Materials, Section 1.

To measure the impact of welfare receipt, we constructed three different variables. The first is a dichotomous indicator of whether individuals receive any type of welfare related social assistance (0 = Not receiving, 1 = Receiving). The second is a dichotomous indicator of whether they received social assistance specifically related to social exclusion (0 = Not receiving, 1 = Receiving). The third variable categorizes different combinations of welfare receipt: 'Only social exclusion,' 'Only other,' 'Both,' and 'No assistance.'

Covariates

Considering the existing literature on the determinants of political trust, we include the following variables as controls in our main models: gender, age, education, economic activity status (full-time vs. other), housing tenure (homeowner vs. other), citizenship, if the respondent had a long standing illness, and household type (Donoghue & Tranter, 2012; Giustozzi & Gangl, 2021; Hooghe et al., 2017; Reher, 2020; Röder & Mühlau, 2012).

The supplementary materials provide additional descriptive statistics on the sample, the variables included in this study, as well as the distribution of poverty categories by country and the percentage of social assistance receipt in each case (see Section 3 and Tables S2-S5 in the supplementary materials).

Data treatment and analytical strategy

Before proceeding with our analytical strategy, it is important to highlight at least two relevant aspects regarding how we handle data on different types of income and welfare receipt. First, in the EU-SILC, some countries—a minority—allow negative values for these variables, while others do not (Atkinson & Marlier, 2010). Although the proportion of such cases is small, it may affect the comparability of measures across countries. Therefore, we decided to exclude negative values in social assistance variables. Second, the presence of some extreme, unrealistic values could also influence the results. After screening these values, we decided to remove the top 1% of observations with the highest values in variables related to social assistance receipts. Additionally, we excluded participants who were classified as being in deep poverty but reported high levels of economic satisfaction. Individuals in this situation tend to be more similar to those not experiencing poverty on proxy variables of wealth (e.g., material deprivation, capacity to face unexpected expenses or the imputed rent from financial assets; Martí & Rodenas, 2024). This decision also aims to improve both construct and criterion validity.

To enhance the statistical power of our analyses and ensure more reliable parameter estimates, we adopted two strategies. First, rather than using countries as the second-level unit of analysis, we used regions, thereby increasing the number of observations at this level (individuals at level 1, regions at level 2, and countries at level 3). The number of regions included in our analysis is 111. Second, to obtain unbiased parameter estimates, we used REML (Restricted Maximum Likelihood) as the estimation method, which is recommended when the number of clusters is limited (McNeish & Stapleton, 2016).

Given the way we conceptualize the data, we have a three-level structure with individual observations (L1; $N = 403,018$), nested within regions (L2; $N = 111$), which are in turn nested within countries (L3; $N = 26$). Some countries do not provide information on regions (e.g., Germany, Portugal, Serbia, Slovenia, Netherlands), so we excluded them from our analyses. We also excluded Denmark, as the data show that no individuals reported receiving social exclusion-related benefits. We group-mean centered the level 1 variables. This approach removes variation due to higher-level grouping units. However, since our interest lies in the individual effects of the different levels of poverty or material deprivation and social assistance receipt on political trust, it is the most appropriate strategy (Enders & Tofighi, 2007). In the discussion, we revisit the issue of cross-national comparisons. As recommended in the literature on multilevel analysis with complex survey designs, we scaled the weights before conducting the analyses. Specifically, we scaled the weights so that the new weights sum to the cluster sample size (Carle, 2009). For building the multilevel models, we used the R program (version 4.4.2; R Core Team, 2024) and we the *lmer4* package (Bates et al., 2015). We constructed several models. Some models included socioeconomic categories based on income, while others use material deprivation, but otherwise, the models remain the same. First, we estimated an intercept-only model, followed by a second model incorporating individual-level controls. In subsequent models, we introduced our independent variables (e.g., socioeconomic categories, welfare receipt). However, we estimated separate models for each variable related to welfare receipt.

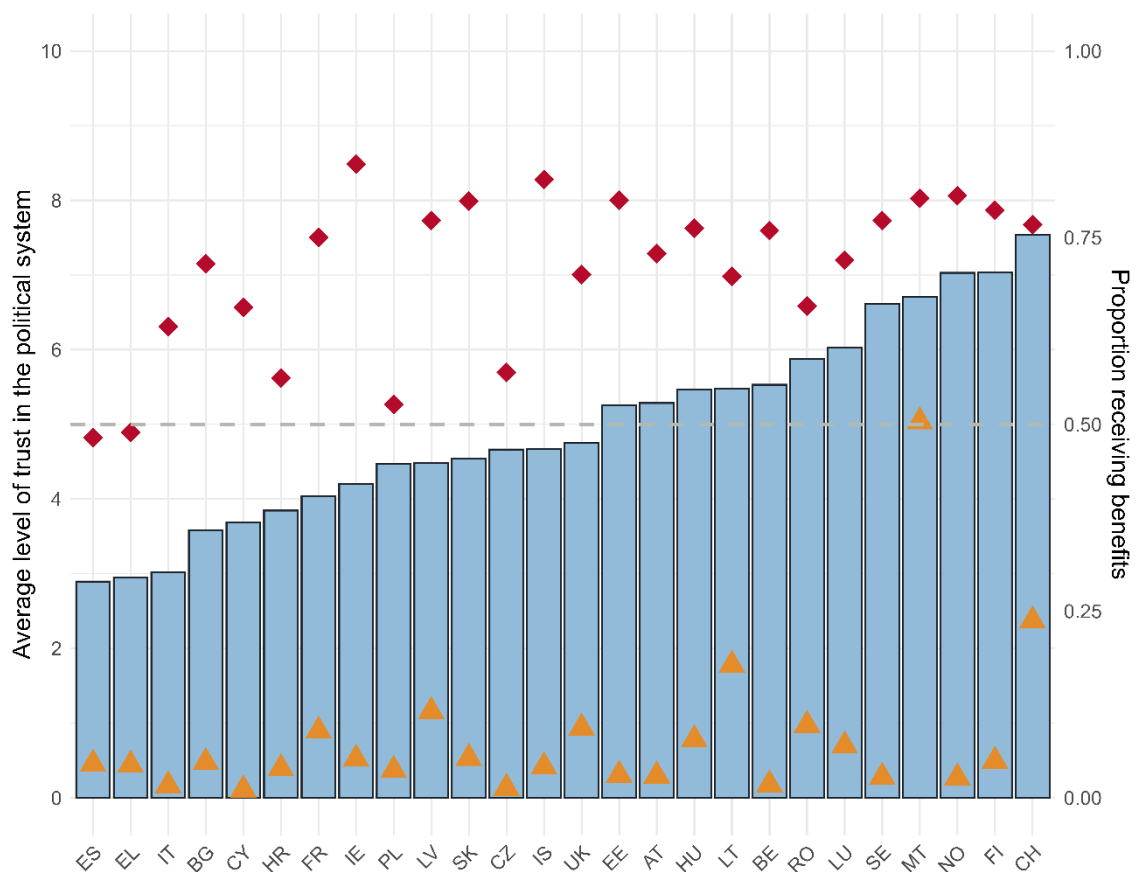
Results

First, in the pooled sample, levels of trust in the political system ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 2.72$) were moderate. As shown in Figure 1, levels of trust in the political system vary considerably and align with previous research: they are lower in countries more severely

affected by the economic crisis and austerity measures, such as Spain, Italy or Greece (Armingeon & Guthman, 2013; Erkel & van der Meer 2016; Friedrichsen & Zahn, 2014; Kroknes et al., 2015). Regarding welfare receipt, 6.99% indicated that they received social assistance related to social exclusion, while 68.45% reported receiving any type of social assistance. Figure 1 also displays the proportion of individuals receiving social assistance in general, as well as those receiving social exclusion-related benefits.

Figure 1.

Average levels of trust in the political system and proportion of individuals receiving social assistance by country.



Note. The red diamonds indicate the proportion of individuals receiving any type of social assistance (including social exclusion-related benefits). The orange triangles

indicate the proportion of individuals receiving social exclusion-related assistance not classified elsewhere. Source: EU-SILC 2013 cross-sectional data.

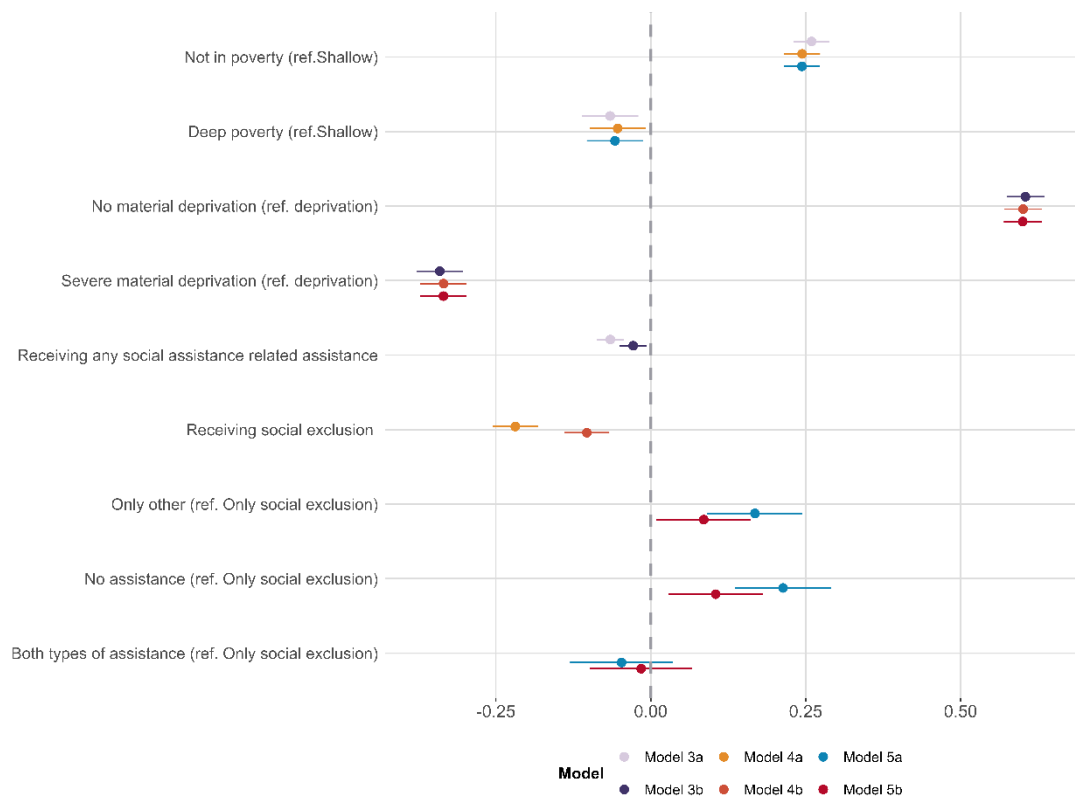
Now we present the results of our main multilevel models. For the intercept-only models and those including covariates (Models 0 and 1), readers can refer to Section 4 of the supplementary materials (Table S6). After estimating the intercept-only models and those including covariates, we introduced socioeconomic categories in a new model—one for income-based poverty categories and another for those based on material deprivation. Using shallow poverty as the reference category, we observe that not being in income poverty predicts higher trust in the political system ($B = 0.26, p < .001$), while experiencing deep poverty predicts lower trust ($B = -0.06, p = .008$). A similar, stronger pattern emerges for material deprivation: compared to individuals experiencing material deprivation, those without deprivation exhibit higher trust in the political system ($B = 0.61, p < .001$), whereas those in severe material deprivation show lower levels of trust ($B = -0.34, p < .001$).

Next, we estimated different models incorporating variables related to welfare receipt (Models 3a–5b). As shown in Figure 2, after accounting for the different socioeconomic categories and all covariates, welfare receipt affects trust in the political system. We observe a similar pattern across income-based and material deprivation categories. Specifically, receiving any form of welfare-related assistance predicts lower political trust, although the effect is small. When focusing on social exclusion-related assistance, the effects are stronger: receiving this type of aid, compared to not receiving it, predicts lower levels of political trust. Interestingly, we also find that receiving only social exclusion-related assistance—compared to receiving only other types of aid or no aid at all—is associated with lower political trust. However, there are no significant differences comparing the former to those receiving both types of assistance, that is,

social exclusion-related aid as well as other forms of social support. The complete models can be consulted in the Supplementary Materials (Section 4, Tables S6 and S7).

Figure 2.

Multilevel models predicting trust in the political system



Note. In the models, the letter *a* indicates that the poverty categories included are based on income; the letter *b* indicates that they are based on material deprivation. Each model includes only one variable related to social assistance receipt, entered independently. 95% confidence intervals. Source: EU-SILC 2013 cross-sectional data.

Finally, we estimated several models incorporating interaction terms between socioeconomic categories and the welfare receipt. Regarding the interaction between receiving any type of assistance and socioeconomic categories, we found an interaction effect for individuals who are not in income poverty and receive some type of benefits

($B = 0.12, p < .001$), and in the same direction for people in deep income poverty receiving these benefits ($B = 0.11, p = .037$). We also found an interaction, but with the reverse sign, for those in severe material deprivation ($B = 0.11, p = .016$). Regarding the receipt of social exclusion related assistance, we do observe a significant interaction between deep poverty ($B = -0.15, p = .016$) or severe material deprivation ($B = -0.21, p < .001$) and receiving social exclusion-related assistance.

To better interpret these effects, we computed the estimated marginal means from these models¹ using the *emmeans* package (Lenth, 2025). The results of these analyses are presented in Figure 3. Additionally, we conducted pairwise mean comparisons using Bonferroni-adjusted p -values. Panels A and B display the conditional effects of income poverty category and material deprivation, respectively, along with whether or not individuals receive any form of social assistance, on political trust. As shown, the results are not particularly consistent: for some groups, receiving such assistance is associated with lower political trust, but no clear pattern emerges. However, Panels C and D of Figure 3 present a clearer picture. These panels show the results for the dichotomous variable indicating whether individuals receive social exclusion-related assistance. Here, we observe that receiving this type of assistance is consistently associated with lower political trust across nearly all levels of poverty or deprivation—except among those experiencing moderate (but not severe) material deprivation. This negative association appears particularly strong for individuals in the most acute forms of material or income deprivation. Although there is visual overlap between the confidence intervals of the means, the pairwise comparisons—adjusted

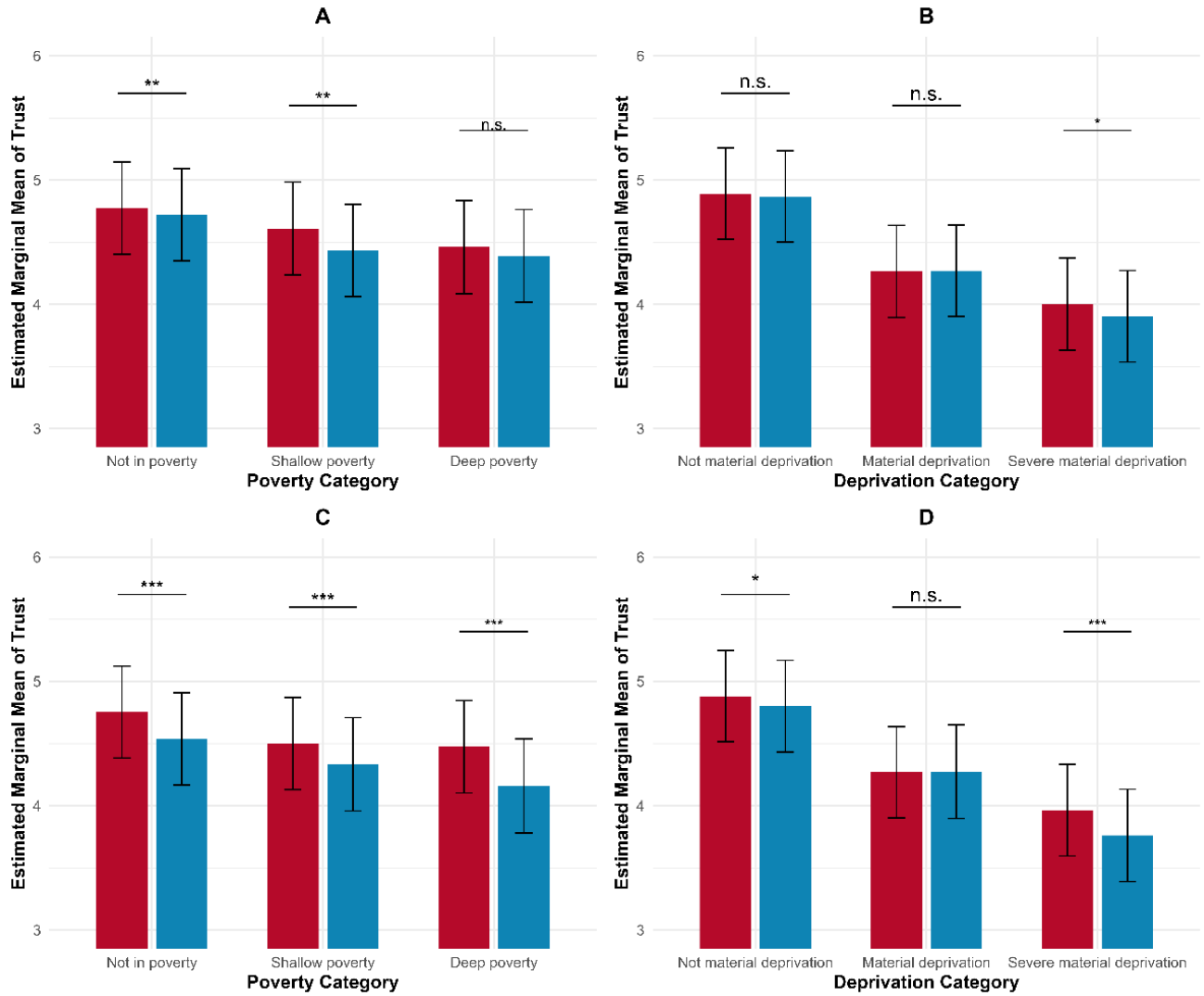
¹ Degrees of freedom were set to infinity ($df = \infty$) in the marginal means estimation due to the large sample size, a common approach when asymptotic properties dominate and Kenward-Roger or Satterthwaite adjustments are computationally prohibitive (Kenward & Roger, 1997).

using the Bonferroni method—reveal statistically significant differences consistent with our main findings. These are also depicted in Figure 3. Here, we specifically compare individuals who do or do not receive assistance within each group. Full pairwise comparisons across all groups are provided in the Supplementary Materials (Tables S9–S12, Section 4).

The low number of observations for some combinations in certain regions calls for caution when interpreting these results definitively, as we further elaborate in the discussion. For the same reason, we refrain from including here the unclear and inconsistent results of the interactions with the four-level variable on different types of social assistance. However, interested readers can find them in Table S8 of Section 4 in the supplementary materials together with the complete models for the interaction effects for the other variables.

Figure 3.

Estimated marginal means showing the effect of different socioeconomic categories and the type of assistance received including all covariates.



Note. Panels A and B display whether individuals receive any type of social assistance (red = non-recipients, blue = recipients). Panels C and D display whether individuals receive social exclusion-related assistance (red = non-recipients, blue = recipients). Estimated marginal means from Models 6a, 6b, 7a, and 7b in Table S8 (Supplementary Materials, Section 5). Asterisks indicate the significance level of mean comparisons (* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$). Source: EU-SILC 2013 cross-sectional data.

Finally, we repeated our main models, with some variations, as part of our robustness checks. First, we used a composite measure of institutional trust, which included trust in the political system, the judicial system, and the police (the three

available items in the 2013 EU-SILC module). Second, in another set of models we used countries as the second-level unit (instead of regions) and included several country-level controls: GDP per capita and the unemployment rate. Third, we repeated the main analyses excluding countries with the lowest levels of political trust (Spain, Italy, Greece, and Bulgaria). Lastly, we re-estimated the models presented here with other minor modifications. Specifically, we tested alternative model specifications that are equally reasonable compared to our original decisions. For example, we changed the operationalization of the age variable and did not exclude the top 1% of observations with the highest values for social assistance receipt. The results were largely similar across all cases, with the exception of the effect of deep income poverty on political trust, which varied slightly when a different operationalization of age was used and when including second level variables (see Supplementary Materials, Section 6).

Discussion

In this paper, we had three objectives: (1) to analyze the relationship between different socioeconomic categories and political trust; (2) to examine the impact of welfare receipt on political trust, with a particular focus on social exclusion-related assistance; and (3) to assess the interaction effect between the type of assistance received and socioeconomic circumstance on trust.

Regarding the first objective, our results are quite clear. Deeper forms of poverty are associated with lower political trust. Interestingly, these effects are stronger and more consistent when categorizations are based on material deprivation indicators of poverty. These findings align with previous studies on the relationship between socioeconomic status and institutional or political trust (Boda & Medve-Bálint, 2014; Goubin & Hooghe, 2020; Kim et al., 2022; van Erkel & van der Meer, 2016, Zmerli &

Castillo, 2015). However, beyond confirming this relationship, our results provide important nuances.

We examine the specific influence of belonging to different socioeconomic categories on political trust, analyzing what happens below the poverty line by distinguishing between shallow and deep poverty. Furthermore, we incorporate not only income-based measures but also material deprivation, which captures a different—though related—dimension of living standards. Most previous research has focused on other indicators of socioeconomic status, primarily income or educational attainment, making these findings a contribution in their own right. By focusing on more tangible aspects of poverty, the analysis reveals deeper and more pronounced effects on political trust.

Regarding our second objective, in our statistical models we observe that welfare receipt, as well as the specific type of assistance, influences political trust, also incorporating into the models the different socioeconomic categories. First, individuals who receive any form of social assistance exhibit slightly lower levels of trust compared to those who do not receive assistance. Moreover, receiving social exclusion-related assistance has a stronger negative effect on trust. This becomes particularly evident when comparing individuals who receive only this type of assistance to those who receive only other forms of social assistance or none at all, with no significant differences observed for those receiving both types of assistance. This could suggest that engaging with social exclusion protection programs—often bureaucratically complex, cognitively demanding, and uncertain in terms of outcomes—may lead to a decline in institutional trust. This effect could be related to perceptions of institutional effectiveness, the quality of interactions with these institutions, or the failure to meet the expectations set by the welfare state.

Our findings here align with previous literature on the distrust generated by means-tested programs compared to universal ones (Kumlin, 2004; Kumlin & Rothstein, 2005), while extending this discussion to the field of political trust. This has important implications for understanding the unintended outcomes of selective programs and the barriers to accessing them. Unfortunately, we were unable to measure the quality of contact in these individual-bureaucracy interactions. However, several explanations are possible from this point of view. One possible explanation for the decrease in trust could be negative interactions and dissatisfaction with the service (Berg & Johansson, 2020; Christensen & Lægreid, 2005). Moreover, the economic crisis may have contributed to a deterioration in the quality of public services (e.g., due to increased demand), meaning that it is not only the negative nature of the interaction itself, but also the declining quality of that interaction that may be exacerbating the effects. While our data do not allow us to directly test these hypotheses, they undoubtedly represent an important avenue for future research. Another related explanation could lie in the administrative burden associated with applying for these types of benefits, which is exacerbated by the fact that individuals in vulnerable situations have fewer resources and face greater material pressures (Halling & Barkgaard, 2024). The lack of social, economic, and 'administrative' capital can make navigating complex bureaucratic processes even more demanding (Masood & Nisar, 2021). This is especially relevant considering that administrative burden is unevenly distributed across social groups, and that discriminatory processes are often embedded in how these systems operate (Olsen et al., 2022). In this sense, the lack of trust in the political system could be understood as a consequence, at least in part, of this administrative burden.

Regarding our third question, the results are more difficult to interpret. On the one hand, there is some evidence suggesting that, in the case of social exclusion-related assistance, individuals in deep poverty or severe material deprivation exhibit lower trust when receiving these benefits, whereas this is not the case for more general forms of social assistance. This aligns with the perspective we present here regarding the impact of undergoing costly and demanding bureaucratic processes on individuals already in critical situations, combined with minimal benefits that fail to lift them out of severe vulnerability. More importantly, it highlights the potential effect of this combination of factors on trust in the very institutions that are expected to safeguard citizens' well-being. However, the low number of observations for some combinations in each geographical region, as well as the inconsistency of the results when considering our four-level variable measuring the type of assistance received (e.g., only social exclusion-related assistance, any assistance except social exclusion-related, both types, or no assistance), call for caution before drawing definitive conclusions. Thus, while our results generally suggest that individuals experiencing more severe poverty or material deprivation and receiving social exclusion-related assistance exhibit lower political trust, future research should further explore this interaction using alternative data sources.

Some authors suggest that a lack of trust in institutions may increase non-take-up rates, and conversely, that reducing non-take-up ratios may enhance trust in government (Eurofound, 2015). Interestingly, our results point in a different direction—not necessarily diametrically opposed, but somewhat distinct. That is, contact with the administration and the receipt of social exclusion-related benefits may actually decrease trust in institutions or the political system. This suggests that the process is more complex than it might initially seem. For instance, beyond effective communication

strategies for welfare benefits, it is crucial to ensure that the application process is not excessively demanding, arbitrary, or uncertain. In this regard, future research should explore the potential trajectories of welfare benefit take-up and non-take-up to examine both the factors that prevent individuals from claiming these benefits and those that lead them to discontinue their claims over time.

These results can also be situated within a broader context and linked to long-term processes. One of the factors that may deter policymakers from implementing cuts is social mobilization against them and the expectation that people will react more strongly to losses—particularly well-organized and politically active groups (Starke, 2006). However, the literature consistently shows that individuals with fewer resources, and particularly recipients of social exclusion-related assistance, are less likely to engage in political participation (Mood & Jonsson, 2016; Verba et al., 1995). One potential explanation for this is the socializing role of contact and experiences with welfare programs. As Soss (1999, p. 15) states: ‘Program designs not only communicate information about client status and agency decision-making but also teach lessons about citizenship status and government.’ Our findings suggest that this is a general trend. Welfare receipt, in general, is associated with lower trust in the political system. However, this may be particularly significant for individuals with fewer resources. Moreover, they suggest it may have important implications for how we understand the social and political participation of individuals with fewer resources, particularly through their interactions with the welfare state.

Failed expectations in accessing promised social protection and the ways in which last-resort assistance programs are designed and implemented may undermine political and institutional trust among those experiencing deprivation, but specially among those in the most severe forms of deprivation. Although welfare state

interventions are intended to foster social and political trust, our findings suggest that, for those most dependent on welfare services and institutions, they may instead have the opposite effect, exacerbating distrust and alienation. In turn, this lack of trust in—and alienation from—the political system may discourage participation and engagement in various forms of institutional political action, reinforcing a vicious cycle that contributes to the persistence of poverty. If one of the fundamental principles of welfare states and representative democracies is inclusion—both economic and in terms of civic participation—our results may point to an internal tension between these abstract principles and their practical implementation.

It is equally important to clarify what our research is—and is not—about. In this study, we examine contact with social programs and policies aimed at social exclusion through dichotomous indicators of receipt or non-receipt. This allows us to analyze the influence of administrative contact on political trust. However, we know little about the specific nature of these interactions. That is, we assume that this contact could be negative, whether due to the arbitrariness of the process, discretion in decision-making, informational costs, or any other related factor related to the administrative burden, for example (Barnes, 2021; Masood and Nisar 2021). The nature and limitations of our data does not allow us to explore in depth the specific aspects that influence this relationship. This is a task for future qualitative research or more comprehensive case studies. Related to this, we also lack information on how the amount of social exclusion benefits influences political trust. From a utilitarian perspective, one might expect that the higher the benefit amount, the greater the institutional trust. However, working with gross income—due to the unavailability of net income in many countries—combined with the inability to identify the specific policies included in each country and received by each individual, makes these data unsuitable for such an analysis.

Another limitation lies in the measurement mismatch between the household-level indicator of welfare receipt and the individual-level indicator of political trust. Specifically, by using household-level data on welfare receipt, we implicitly assume either that the experience of welfare services is uniformly shared across household members or that the respondent themselves has directly engaged with the benefits received. While this assumption may not always hold — given that engagement with welfare institutions can differ within households — the household-level measure nonetheless captures a broader exposure to welfare dependency within the immediate social environment. This exposure is likely to influence individual perceptions of political institutions, even if indirectly. Thus, although there is a risk of measurement mismatch, the household-level indicator still provides valuable information about the respondent's socioeconomic context and the potential indirect effects of welfare receipt on political trust.

Finally, while our study includes multiple countries and employs multilevel analysis techniques, it is not a cross-country comparison, and we cannot draw conclusions about how different welfare architectures and social exclusion policy implementations shape political trust. Our goal was to examine the individual-level influence of social assistance receipt and socioeconomic position on political trust. The challenge of achieving high statistical power, along with the measurement limitations discussed earlier, makes it impractical to focus on level-2 (regional) or level-3 (country) variables. This does not, in any way, imply denying the importance of national, regional, or local contexts in understanding this relationship. However, different types of data and empirical designs would be necessary to explore these aspects in greater depth.

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