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Have people 'had enough of experts'? The impact of populism and pandemic misinformation on institutional trust in comparative perspective

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ABSTRACT

Public trust in institutions is a key prerequisite for effective crisis management. However, the rise of populism and misinformation in recent years made it increasingly difficult to maintain institutional trust. Despite this recognition, we still lack a systematic understanding of how exposure to misinformation and populist political orientation affect people's trust in institutions. This paper fills this gap by adopting an original approach to trust, focusing on prospective trust rather than trust in the present, and by comparing four countries led by populist leaders during the pandemic – Brazil, Poland, Serbia, and the United States. The comparative design allows us to consider not only the role of individual-level factors (populist attitudes and misinformation exposure) but also the role of different approaches to the COVID-19 pandemic adopted in the four countries. The study utilizes data from a cross-sectional survey, carried out between November and December 2022 ($N = 5000$). Our findings show that populist attitudes are the most significant predictor of distrust in political institutions in all four countries. Believing in false information related to COVID-19, on the other hand, has a stronger impact on distrust in expert institutions – public health authorities, scientists, and medical professionals. The data also highlight the importance of local context and different approaches to handling the pandemic in the dynamics of trust. In Poland and Serbia, populist voters have more trust in both healthcare authorities as well as in political institutions; however, in Brazil and the United States, populist voters were more likely to distrust expert institutions.

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Trust in institutions is of paramount importance for the effective management of a public crisis. It influences effective crisis communication of advice and guidelines from different organizations (Coombs et al., 2010), encourages compliance with crisis-related measures

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(Bargain & Aminjonov, 2020), facilitates resource allocation and response coordination (Cheung & Parent, 2021), enhances social cohesion and engagement (Aldrich & Meyer, 2015; Paton, 2007), and encourages investments vital to economic recovery (Uslaner, 2010). Securing and maintaining public trust was crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic, when governments and authorities had to adopt unprecedented measures with high conformity costs to mitigate the impact of the disease. This was particularly challenging due to the widespread dissemination of misinformation, as well due to the rising tide of populism, which brought along general antagonism towards elites (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2017; Mudde, 2017), including experts and scientific institutions (Eberl et al., 2021; Mede & Schäfer, 2020).

There is a general assumption that the healthcare crisis has had a negative impact on public trust (John, 2021; Kaur & Thomas, 2020). However, we are still lacking a more systematic understanding of whether and how the exposure to misinformation and populist political orientation affected people's trust in political and healthcare authorities. This is especially relevant in countries with populist leaders, many of whom have been known to obstruct the capacity of both public health organizations as well as the media to engage in effective health crisis communication.

As a sociological concept, trust is commonly defined as a belief or feeling about what a person or institution is likely to do in the future (Misztal, 1996; Sztompka, 1999). Even though trust is future oriented, most existing scholarship focuses on the state of trust in the present, largely because expectations of future behaviour (and therefore trust) are typically grounded in perceptions of present or past behaviour of the person or institution that is the object of trust (Newton, 1999; Sasaki, 2019). In contrast, this paper presents an original contribution which explicitly acknowledges the future-oriented nature of trust, by assessing prospective trust in the ability of political and expert institutions to manage a potential new pandemic in the future, while also taking into account the impact of perceptions of past behaviour of the same institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our study is designed as a comparative one, examining four countries which, during the time of the pandemic, were led by populist leaders – Brazil, Poland, Serbia, and the United States. All these countries were characterized by high levels of support for populism at the start of the pandemic, but they also displayed some fundamental differences in the way the pandemic was handled by their leaders and governments (Barberia & Gómez, 2020; Daniels, 2021; Guasti, 2020; Hatcher, 2020; Ortega & Orsini, 2020; Peci et al., 2023; Petrović, 2020; Rutledge, 2020). While government officials in Brazil and the United States promoted numerous coronavirus-related conspiracy theories, constantly challenging healthcare and expert institutions and sowing doubt about preventive measures against the pandemic, Poland and Serbia observed more strict public health measures, in accordance with expert institutions. Also, all four (populist) incumbents ran for re-election during the pandemic, being accountable to voters evaluating their decisions about the health crisis.

The paper seeks to make important contributions to the study of institutional trust, by filling several existing gaps in the literature. First, this paper assesses anticipated future shifts in public trust due to the pandemic, by focusing on expectations about handling a new pandemic in the future. Second, the research adopts a comparative, multi-country approach to institutional trust, bringing to light the importance of local context in countries ruled by populist presidents. Third, the models are built around trust as a dependent variable, rather than an independent one, deviating thereby from the

mainstream approach in the literature. Finally, we disentangle different types of institutional trust (political and expert) and their different causes.

Trust in the age of populism and misinformation

Over the last few decades, democracies across the world have experienced varying levels of decline in political trust, even in countries where support for democratic values remains high (Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Dalton, 2004; Hetherington & Rudolph, 2020; Hosking, 2019). According to some authors, increasing distrust of political institutions has helped create the conditions for the rise of populist parties and politicians (Berg, 2021; Dustmann et al., 2017; Keefer et al., 2021), who presented themselves as a solution to the perceived crisis of representative democracy and to citizens' dissatisfaction with the performance of political institutions. Indeed, research has repeatedly demonstrated that populist voters as well as people holding populist attitudes display lower levels of political trust (Akkerman et al., 2017; Marcos-Marne & Sendra, 2024; Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018), a tendency linked to some of the key components of the ideational core of populism, particularly people-centrism and anti-elitism, which pits the 'pure' / 'good' people against the 'corrupt' / 'evil' elite (cf. Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2017; Mudde, 2017). This antagonistic, Manicheian stance towards elites is arguably reinforced by the populist voters' perception that political institutions (run by elites) no longer serve the needs and interests of the people, and are hence untrustworthy (Geurkink et al., 2020). Nevertheless, while political distrust is commonly treated as one of the factors that facilitate the growth of populism, researchers have also found evidence of an opposite effect, suggesting that populism can itself lead to a decrease in political trust; namely, studies based on longitudinal designs showed that political trust among populist voters decreased over time (Castanho Silva, 2017; Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018; Rooduijn et al., 2016). This conflicting evidence suggests that the relationship between political trust and populism might in fact be circular and mutually reinforcing. Hooghe and Dassonneville (2018), inspired by Noelle-Neumann's (1974) seminal concept of 'spiral of silence', describe this as the 'spiral of distrust'. In this dynamic, voting for populist / protest parties and political distrust reinforce each other.

This spiral of distrust, however, is not necessarily constrained only to the political domain, just as populist anti-elitism does not target only political elites. Studies have been exploring the tendency by populist actors to challenge and confront scientific institutions, experts and academic elites, in a phenomenon conceptualized as 'science-related populism' (Mede & Schäfer, 2020) or simply 'science populism' (Eberl et al., 2021). In this variant of populism, the fundamental, morally charged antagonism between the people and the elites is manifested in the conflict over epistemic authority, in which science populism attempts to delegitimize organized science as the supreme producer of knowledge and truth, and instead places the emphasis on alternative epistemologies that highlight ordinary people's 'common sense', personal experiences and emotions (Mede & Schäfer, 2020). Exploiting this, populist leaders seek political gains by attacking the trustworthiness of expert institutions, including by openly mocking them or questioning their usefulness, as illustrated perhaps most (in)famously by the claim that 'people in this country have had enough of experts', uttered by the UK Justice Secretary Michael Gove during the campaign around the Brexit Referendum in 2016 (Mance, 2016). This

quote also serves as reminder that scientific populism is not just a political mobilization strategy, but it continues to thrive even after these political actors have gained power and formed a government, given that populist leaders are known for being hostile towards technocratic expertise and downplay the advisory role of scientific bodies when implementing public policies (Bartha et al., 2020).

In recent years, the delegitimization of expert knowledge and undermining of public trust in institutions has also been aided by misinformation and disinformation, which are often strategically utilized by populist actors to fight their opponents and to secure electoral victories (Tumber & Waisbord, 2021). Because of its highly instrumental approach to truth and facts, populism displays what scholars have called an 'affinity with disinformation' (Hameleers, 2021; Tumber & Waisbord, 2021; Waisbord, 2018), supporting beliefs and cognitive biases irrespective of whether they are based in reality and factual information. The compatibility of populism with mis/disinformation is however observed not only on the level of the supply side of populism (by populist actors and their discursive style), but also on the demand side. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, research has repeatedly demonstrated that people with populist attitudes are more likely to believe misinformation (Hameleers, 2022) or hold conspiracy beliefs (Castanho Silva et al., 2017); similar associations were found among populist right-wing voters (Van Kessel et al., 2020; Zimmermann & Kohring, 2020).

Notwithstanding their symbiotic relationship with populism, mis/disinformation are not dependent solely on populist political actors to be disseminated among the population and contribute to erosion of public trust in institutions, including the scientific ones. The new, high-choice information environment (Van Aelst et al., 2017), marked by information abundance, fragmentation and polarization, has itself been linked with the rise and fast-spreading of false information, rumours and conspiracy theories, challenging expertise and threatening as a consequence the implementation of science-based public policies (Levy et al., 2021). And even though most attention is commonly paid to digital platforms as channels of mis/disinformation, such content is regularly amplified or even actively promoted by mainstream media, especially those with strong partisan leaning, such as Fox News, which are known to critically confront expert knowledge (Hmielowski et al., 2014; Peck, 2019).

Drivers of institutional (mis)trust during the COVID-19 pandemic

Existing scholarship has produced a growing body of research about the relationships between institutional trust and the coronavirus pandemic. Most studies have focused on institutional trust as an independent variable (Devine et al., 2021), seeking to assess the effects of public trust during the pandemic on a range of areas, including compliance with government measures, risk perception, or levels of mortality (Cairney & Wellstead, 2021; Caplanova et al., 2021; Dryhurst et al., 2020; Goldstein & Wiedemann, 2022; Han et al., 2023; Vu, 2021). Very few papers, however, have investigated trust as a dependent variable, and the consequences of the pandemic for trust (for exceptions see e.g., Aksoy et al., 2020; Kritzinger et al., 2021; Pérez-Fuentes et al., 2020; Schraff, 2021). Of those studies that explored the impact of perceived government performance on trust, most found a significantly positive relationship. One of the few studies that demonstrated this effect – namely that negative perceptions of government performance can led to a

decrease in government trust – was carried out in the UK, where public trust in government was seriously harmed by multiple lockdown breach scandals (Fancourt et al., 2020). However, in countries as different as Germany, Italy, Pakistan, South Korea, and Sweden, authors found positive effects on institutional trust linked to various factors. These include perceptions of how politics handled the pandemic (Bromme et al., 2022), the perceived adequacy of the mitigation measures (Falcone et al., 2020), and proactive responses to the crisis by central and local government (Kye & Hwang, 2020). Additionally, positive perceptions of good governance (Mansoor, 2021) and public rallies under voluntary compliance to measures (Esaiasson et al., 2021) also contributed to trust.

Drawing on the previous scholarship, our first hypotheses therefore assume that:

H1a: Support for government's measures against COVID-19 will be associated with higher level of political trust.

H1b: Support for government's measures against COVID-19 will be associated with higher level of expert trust.

Available studies rarely consider the impact of populist attitudes on institutional trust, but related evidence on the impact of political attitudes and voting preferences offers some useful clues and suggests that populist attitudes are an important predictor of institutional trust. Previous work based on survey data from Austria demonstrated that populist attitudes have a negative impact on trust in both political and scientific institutions (Eberl et al., 2021). In Germany, supporters of the right-wing populist party AfD have less trust in science (Bromme et al., 2022). In the United States, trust in science agencies fell dramatically among Republicans, who are associated with populist attitudes, although views among Democrats and Independents changed little (Hamilton & Safford, 2021). There is also evidence of populist attitudes predicting compliance with preventive measures (Ehrke et al., 2023) With this conclusion in mind, our second set of hypotheses is as following:

H2a – Populist attitudes and voting for a populist candidate will be associated with lower political trust.

H2b – Populist attitudes and voting for a populist candidate will be associated with lower expert trust.

As reviewed in the previous section, misinformation can also be seen as a contributing factor to the levels of trust, even though existing research on the relationship between political trust and misinformation is inconclusive. A longitudinal survey in the United States – carried out during Trump's presidency – observed that fake news exposure is associated with lower trust in media, but higher trust in government (Ognyanova et al., 2020). However, examining survey data from the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Canada, another study did not find evidence that perceived exposure to misinformation undermines trust in national news media and in national/federal government after the Covid-19 pandemic (Boulianne & Humprecht, 2023). On the other hand, some scholarship has found evidence that misinformation can be associated with declines in vaccine intent and compliance with Covid-19 guidelines (Hameleers et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2022; Loomba et al., 2021). In light of the inconclusive state of scholarship, we do not pose a hypothesis but instead ask:

RQ1 – What is the relationship between beliefs in false information and trust in political and expert institutions?

Exposure to news media can also have different types of effects on public trust (Avery, 2009; Strömbäck et al., 2016). According to Evans and Hargittai (2020), following news about the outbreak of the coronavirus was positively associated with believing in scientists' understanding of the pandemic and whether they share respondent's values. Assessing the role of UK television, Morani et al. (2022) observed that health and scientific experts received limited coverage, whilst evening bulletins mostly relied on political sources from the government. However, viewers expressed they would prefer to have experts talking about how the pandemic was being handled. Au et al. (2020) blamed junk health news sources for sowing distrust in health officials on social media.

Given the rather disparate findings from existing studies on news media consumption during the pandemic, we formulate another research question:

RQ2 – What is the relationship between news consumption and trust in political and expert institutions?

Context matters: differences in populist governments' approach to the pandemic

While the discussion so far focused on individual-level drivers of institutional trust – including perceptions of past performance, populism, and misinformation – it is also important to take into consideration systemic, country-level determinants. Among these, the general approach to the pandemic adopted by populist governments and leaders in the countries under question is arguably of particular importance, especially given both similarities and differences in the ways they responded to the health crisis, forming two distinct patterns. While presidents Donald Trump in the United States and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil acted to discredit experts and science (Barberia & Gómez, 2020; Daniels, 2021; Hatcher, 2020; Ortega & Orsini, 2020; Peci et al., 2023; Rutledge, 2020), Andrzej Duda in Poland and Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia supported measures to fight the pandemic in agreement with healthcare authorities, to the point that they were accused of over-reacting and proposing initiatives that could threaten civil liberties and even democratic institutions (Guasti, 2020; Petrović, 2020).

It is particularly difficult to grasp the motivations leading up to Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro engaging with misinformation about the disease and the vaccines. One hypothesis is that they downplayed the significance of the crisis to avoid the blame over the negative economic effect of restrictive health measures. This framing of the COVID-19 pandemic and their policy responses were only possible because of the federalism and the party system in both countries (Béland et al., 2021). As the death toll increased in each country, these presidents blamed governors and sometimes mayors for the situation.

Another possibility is that both Trump and Bolsonaro promoted coronavirus-related conspiracy theories circulating online and in right-wing media as a distraction from the poor response to the pandemic or in order to cast it in a better light (Graves, 2021). This is also plausible considering the absurdity of some of the statements from both populist leaders, including the endorsement of miracle cures trafficked online.

In contrast, populist leaders Aleksandar Vučić and Andrzej Duda adopted one of the strictest measures for fighting the pandemic enacted in Europe. In Serbia, all nonessential businesses were closed; armed soldiers were placed outside hospitals and elder care facilities. All older people were forbidden from going out and were fined if they didn't comply. There were curfews, some lasting 84 hours at a time (Todorović, 2020). Besides that, Aleksandar Vučić enjoyed the support of a biased pro-government media (Jovanović, 2020). In Poland, the COVID-19 ban on the organization of meetings, assemblies, and mass events gave an advantage in the presidential campaign to incumbent Andrzej Duda, who was also endorsed by a biased public media (Tatarczyk & Wojtasik, 2023).

In the light of different contexts of the pandemic, and the way populist leaders and governments reacted to the health crisis, our third research question considers how these contrasts will reflect on the relationships with institutional trust in each country:

> RQ3 – Considering the different patterns of misinformation and conflict between populist leaders and expert institutions, how are the predictors of institutional trust in Poland and Serbia different from those in Brazil and the United States?

Data and measures

Our study adopted a comparative approach, following the 'most similar design', allowing for common system characteristics to be controlled, while intersystemic differences to be used as explanatory variables (Anckar, 2008; Esser & Vliegenthart, 2017). This design makes it possible to study the relationships between misinformation, populism and public policies in countries whose political environment is largely similar, especially because of the high levels of polarization and distrust in institutions that made possible the election of populist leaders. We assume that populist parties and leaders might behave differently while in the opposition. Drawing on these assumptions, the countries were selected based on the following criteria: (1) the country has an electoral democracy with presidential system; (2) all presidents were running for re-election, making them accountable for their policies and actions during the COVID-19 pandemic; (3) all presidents were right-wing populists.

The data were collected by means of an online survey, carried out in all four countries between November and December 2022 by Lightspeed (Kantar). Nationally representative samples included 5,000 respondents (in Brazil, $N = 1500$; in Poland, $N = 1000$; in Serbia, $N = 1000$; in the United States, $N = 1500$), stratified by quotas according to sex, age, geographic regions, and income. We did not have to use weights as the data had a strong match with the census profiles. The project has received an approval from the Ethics Review Sub-Committee of Loughborough University (reference number 2022-8439-9153).

Dependent variables

Institutional trust was measured by two different dependent variables: political trust and expert trust. Each variable was based on the question: 'If there is a new pandemic in the future, to which extent would you trust following institutions to handle it?' The answers

were recorded on a 1–10 scale, in which 1 indicated 'I would not trust at all', and 10 'I would definitely trust'.

Political trust (which we treat synonymously with trust in political institutions – cf. Turper & Aarts, 2017, p. 417) was a latent variable composing three different institutions: President, Federal or National Government and State or Local Government (CFI = 1.0; TLI = 1.0; RMSEA = 0.00; SRMR = 0.00; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.9$ for ALL; 0.86 for BR; 0.88 for PL; 0.93 for RS; 0.93 for the US). Likewise, trust in expert institutions was composed of three items, too, namely: public health authorities, scientists and medical professionals (CFI = 1.0; TLI = 1.0; RMSEA = 0.00; SRMR = 0.00; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.9$ for ALL; 0.86 for BR; 0.9 for PL; 0.89 for RS; 0.92 for the US).

Independent variables

Support for government's pandemic policies was based on an index of six responses to the question:

> We would now like to ask you about our opinions on specific measures that were adopted in your country at different times to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. In your opinion, do you disagree or agree that the authorities did the right thing to introduce.

(1) mandatory wearing of masks or face coverings in public; (2) requirements for social distancing, or staying 6 ft from others; (3) period of self-isolation for those testing positive; (4) temporary closure of schools, businesses and other areas of public life; (5) stay-at-home policies that discouraged people from gathering with others outside their households; (6) nationwide vaccination program. The answers for each of these questions were recorded on a 1–10 scale, in which 1 represented 'Fully disagree' and 10 meant 'Fully agree'. To aggregate these answers, we used a latent variable (CFI = 0.93; TLI = 0.89; RMSEA = 0.17; SRMR = 0.04; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$ for ALL; 0.88 for BR; 0.93 for PL; 0.87 for RS; 0.93 for the US).

To assess beliefs in misinformation, respondents declared their agreement or disagreement with 9 statements about the COVID-19 pandemic, preventive measures and vaccines, which are known to be true or false. The question was:

> Ever since the beginning of the pandemic, various claims and arguments have been made in the public domain about COVID-19 or the vaccines, which some people believed in, while others considered them to be false. Can you tell us to what extent do you agree or disagree with following statements.

(1) Covid-19 was purposefully created in a lab; (2) The US military is behind the creation of the virus; (3) Covid-19 vaccines have been developed using human embryos; (4) Covid-19 vaccines contain microchips; (5) Face masks can make people ill; (6) The official numbers of deaths from Covid-19 have been grossly exaggerated; (7) Natural immunity from Covid-19 is better than vaccines; (8) Covid-19 vaccines are experimental, and their health risks are not properly known; (9) Covid-19 vaccines can change people's DNA.

Respondents answered the questions on a 5-point scale, where. 'Fully agree' was coded as 1; 'rather agree' = 0.5; 'fully disagree' = −1; 'rather disagree' = −0.5; 'neither agree nor disagree' = 0. The answers were later aggregated in a latent variable (CFI = 0.93; TLI = 0.89; RMSEA = 0.11; SRMR = 0.05; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$ for ALL; 0.89 for BR; 0.88 for PL; 0.83 for RS; 0.91 for US).

To measure populist attitudes, we used a list of eight questions based on Van Hauwaert et al. (2020), which was drawn originally from Akkerman et al. (2014). The results presented a high level of agreement with populist attitudes, as we should indeed expect to find in countries under populist rule. However, some of the questions did not have a lot of variability in the answers, while disagreement with populist attitudes scored very low, even close to the margin of error in one case. A Comparative Factor Analysis showed a discrepancy between some of the observed data and the predicted values. To improve the model fitness, we dropped three questions and instead used only the following five questions for the construction of the latent variable:

> Can you tell us to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: (1) The people, not the politicians, should make our most important policy decisions; (2) The political differences between the people and the elite are larger than the differences among the people; (3) Elected officials talk too much and take too little action; (4) What people call 'compromise' in politics is really just selling out on one's principles; (5) The particular interests of the political class negatively affect the welfare of the people.

Answers were coded on a 5-point scale, where 'Fully agree' was coded as 1; 'rather agree' = 0.5; 'fully disagree' = −1; 'rather disagree' = −0.5; 'neither agree nor disagree' = 0. Answers were aggregated in a latent variable (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$ for ALL; 0.78 for BR; 0.86 for PL; 0.85 for RS; 0.85 for US).

Populist vote was a dummy variable in which 1 was equivalent to voting in the last election for presidents Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Andrzej Duda in Poland, Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia, and Donald Trump in the United States.

For news access, the survey asked the following question: 'Typically, how often do you access news? By news we mean national, international, regional/local news accessed via any platform (radio, TV, newspaper or online on computers or mobile devices)'. We measured this variable on a 1–9 scale, in which the options were: (1) Never; (2) Less often than once a month; (3) At least once a month; (4) Once a week; (5) Several times a week; (6) Once a day; (7) 2–5 times a day; (8) 6–10 times a day; (9) 10+ times a day (ALL: $M = 5.6$, SD = 1.9; BR: $M = 5.8$, SD = 1.8; PL: $M = 6.0$, SD = 2.0; RS: $M = 5.5$, SD = 1.9; US: $M = 5.3$, SD = 2.0).

Measurement invariance testing showed that the latent variables are conceptually similar and have the same configuration across countries (configural invariance). Accordingly, the same factor structure is imposed on all countries, without constraining factor loadings or intercepts, and observed differences are not due to measurement biases. Weak or strong invariance are not supported in the dataset.

Findings

The data shows that, in all countries, respondents display greater trust in experts than in political institutions (Figure 1 shows the distribution of continuous variables by country, with the median and hinges indicating the first and third quintiles; factors of each latent variable are in the Appendix). As noticed in the previous section, the four countries present high levels of populist attitudes, while Serbia has the highest average and the United States the lowest. This was expected since all of them had populist presidents and, even though Bolsonaro and Trump did not win the re-election bid, all populist leaders got a considerable number of votes.

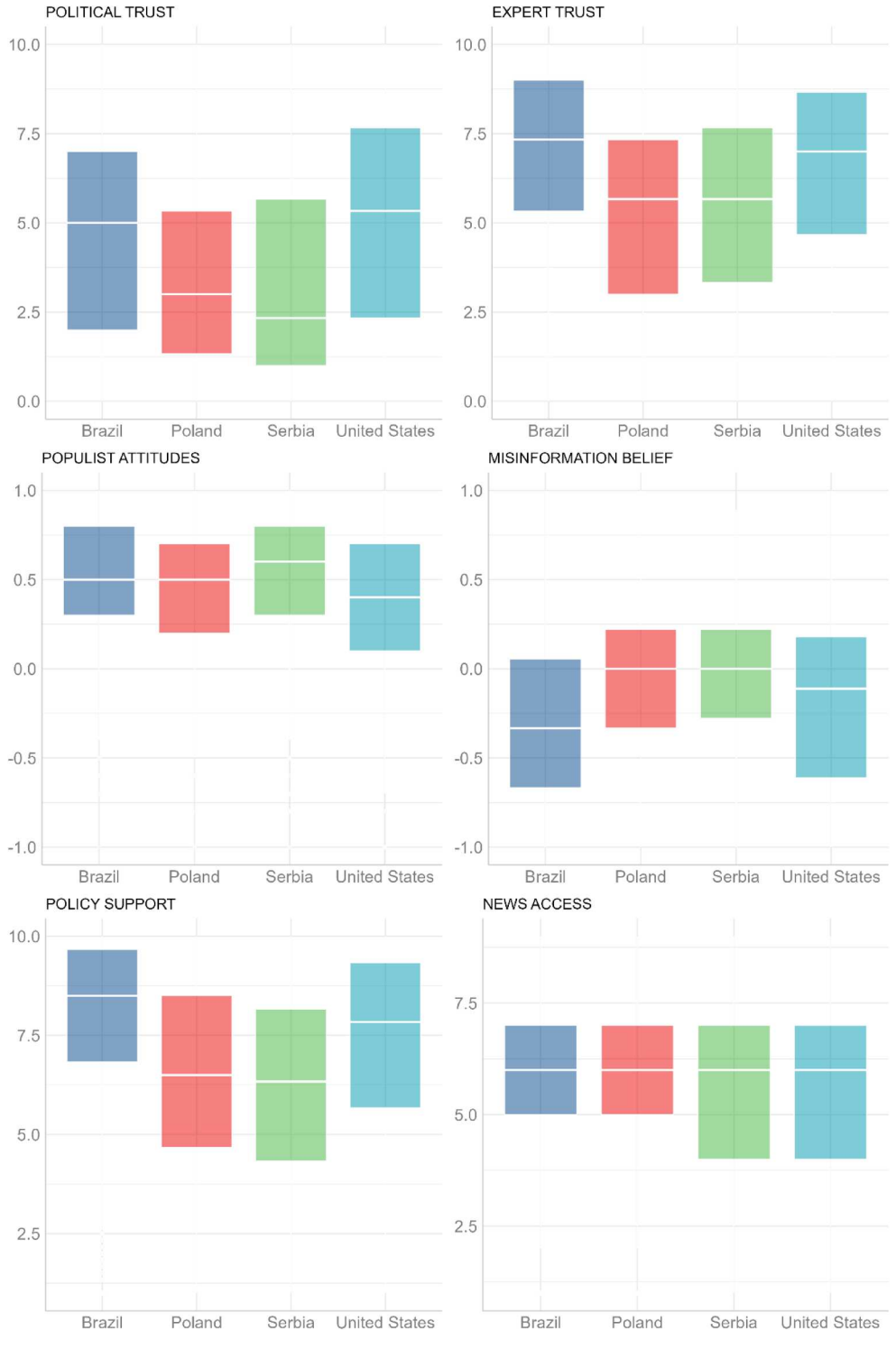

Figure 1. Distribution of main variables by country under populist rule.

The comparison among countries demonstrates the differences between Brazil and the United States, in contrast with Poland and Serbia. On average, the level of institutional trust is higher in Brazil and the United States, and lower in Poland and Serbia. The same trend is noted with support for government measures against the pandemic, which is higher in Brazil and the United States, and lower in Poland and Serbia. However, the relationship is different for misinformation beliefs. Respondents made more mistakes on the misinformation test in Poland and Serbia, and on average believed in fewer false statements about the pandemic in Brazil and the United States. On average, news access had similar frequencies in the four countries.

As we are predicting two different dimensions of institutional trust, we used structural equation modelling to test the relationships with two simultaneous equations presenting as endogenous variables (1) political trust and (2) expert trust. Because the model involves variables measured on Likert scales or ordinal response scales, we chose Diagonally Weighted Least Squares as the estimator, which is considered to be more appropriate in these cases (Li, 2016). This proved to have a better fit than a maximum likelihood estimation, with better fit indices (CFI = 0.90, TLI = 0.89, RMSEA = 0.09, SRMR = 0.08).

The fitted model shows a significant covariance between political trust and expert trust in all countries (standardized betas: BR = 0.70; PL = 0.79; RS = 0.33; US = 0.59). This finding confirms previous studies indicating that confidence in different institutions can be highly associated, such as trust in political institutions and news media (Ariely, 2015; Bennett et al., 2008; Hanitzsch et al., 2018). Though the dependent variables covariate, the model also indicates that there are different relationships between these two dimensions of institutional trust and the exogenous variables.

As a common factor across all countries, supporting government measures stands out as the strongest predictor of both political trust and expert trust, as expected in hypotheses H1a and H1b, which are consistent with institutional approaches to trust. The main differences between the two dimensions of institutional trust are observed with regards to the communication variables. On the one hand, misinformation about the coronavirus pandemic is linked with higher confidence in political institutions, while at the same time it reduces trust in experts (RQ1). This suggests that misinformation is an intervening variable that affects the capacity of citizens to assess institutional performance, leading them to trust politicians but distrust experts – due to the nature of misinformation that was circulated, often disseminated by government officials. On the other hand, news access has significant and positive correlation with expert trust in all countries, but it is insignificant in all countries but the United States when it comes to political trust (Table 1).

These findings point to one possible reason why some politicians might actively engage with misinformation, as they may benefit from increasing public trust as a payoff for supporting conspiracy theories or rumours about the pandemic. This benefit, however, seems to come with the cost of decreasing trust in experts. At the same time, having more access to the news counters its association with misinformation and increases trust in health authorities, scientists and experts.

Assessing the differences between the countries (RQ3), we found that populist voters from Poland and Serbia have higher trust in political institutions, and also higher trust in experts, though the parameters are stronger for the former. However, in Brazil and the United States, populist voters are characterized by lower distrust in experts, and in the

Table 1. SEM model predicting institutional trust in countries with populist government.

	BR	PL	RS	US
Political trust ~				
Policy support	0.26 (0.02)***	0.61 (0.1)***	0.48 (0.15)***	0.69 (0.08)***
Misinformation	0.22 (0.02)***	0.25 (0.06)***	0.23 (0.1)***	0.19 (0.04)***
News access	−0.03 (0.01)	0.02 (0.03)	0.04 (0.04)	0.13 (0.03)***
Populist vote	0.02 (0.04)	0.55 (0.25)***	0.61 (0.47)***	−0.38 (0.13)***
Populist attitude	−0.16 (0.02)***	−0.31 (0.06)***	−0.48 (0.16)***	−0.21 (0.04)***
Expert trust ~				
Policy support	0.41 (0.03)***	0.59 (0.06)***	0.5 (0.05)***	0.68 (0.11)***
Misinformation	−0.26 (0.02)***	−0.2 (0.03)***	−0.13 (0.03)***	−0.05 (0.03)***
News access	0.13 (0.02)***	0.15 (0.03)***	0.11 (0.03)***	0.22 (0.04)***
Populist vote	−0.25 (0.07)***	0.17 (0.09)***	0.31 (0.1)***	−0.37 (0.17)***
Populist attitude	0.01 (0.02)	−0.05 (0.03)**	−0.17 (0.03)***	−0.08 (0.04)***
N used obs.	1330	858	877	1324

CFI = 0.90, TLI = 0.89, RMSEA = 0.09, SRMR = 0.08.
Regressions are controlled by Age, Sex, Education and Income. Values are standardized DWLS estimates based on both observed and latent variables with Standard Error in parenthesis.
p Values: *** (<.001), **(<.01), *(<.05).

US this extends to lower trust in political institutions as well (in Brazil, the relationship between populist vote and political trust is not significant).

A structural equation model with the pooled data from all countries confirms that policy support is the strongest predictor for both political trust (unstandardized beta = 0.71) and expert trust (unstandardized beta = 0.87). The model results are displayed in Figure 2. Populist attitudes have a strong negative correlation with political trust ($\beta = -0.36$) and a smaller one in expert trust ($\beta = -0.10$). On the other hand, misinformation and populist vote have different relationships with each dimension of institutional trust. Misinformation increases trust in politics ($\beta = 0.29$) but decrease trust in experts ($\beta = -0.21$). In the same way, populist voters tend to trust more in politics ($\beta = 0.30$) but are distrustful of experts ($\beta = -0.22$). News access has a small positive association with expert trust ($\beta = 0.12$), but no significant correlation with political trust.

With these results, hypothesis H2a and H2b are only partially confirmed. On the one hand, populist attitudes presented negative correlations both with political and expert trust, consistent in all countries, with the sole exception of a non-significant correlation with trust in experts in Brazil. However, the evidence that populist voters had higher trust in politicians demonstrates that the impact of the pandemic in countries run by populist leaders is more complex than the scholarship previously addressed, and in a need of further attention and discussion.

To ensure the robustness and reliability of research findings, we conducted a multivariate analysis with models predicting all the main variables and using the pooled data with all countries (see the tables in the Appendix). The comparison indicates that the models with institutional trust as dependent variables have a greater explanatory power than other models using institutional trust as independent variables – in the expert trust model, *R*-squared = 0.77 and in the political trust model, *R*-squared = 0.63. Following come the models predicting policy support ($R^2 = 0.57$), misinformation ($R^2 = 0.56$), populist attitudes ($R^2 = 0.19$), news access ($R^2 = 0.16$) and populist vote ($R^2 = 0.10$). The models with institutional trust as dependent variables also had a better fit in a chi-squared difference test (Satorra, 2000; Satorra & Bentler, 2001, 2010). Moreover, we also explored potential interactions between two critical independent variables, belief

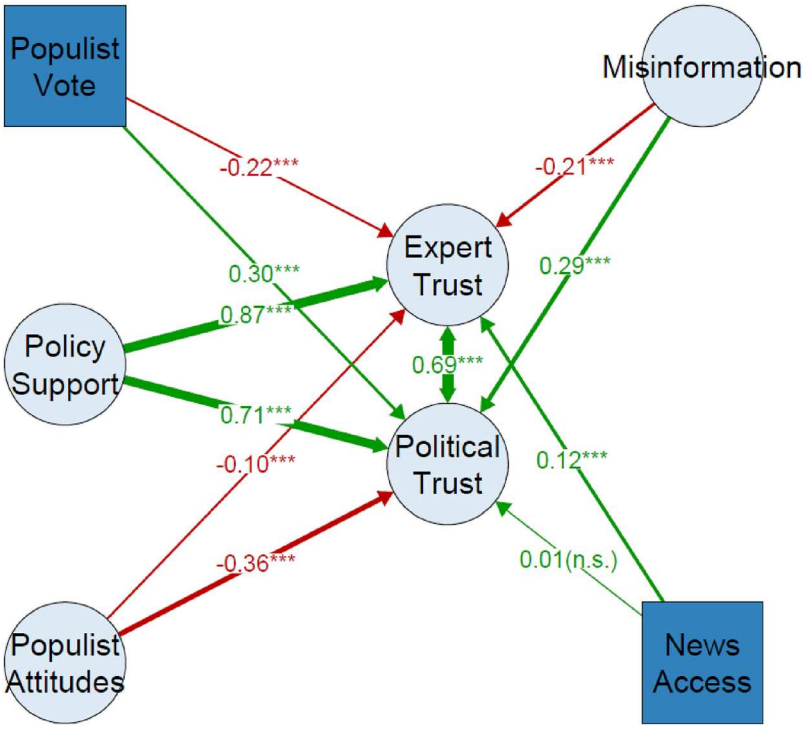

Figure 2. Structural equation model with pooled data from all countries. $N = 5000$. Regressions for each endogenous variable are controlled by Age, Sex, Education and Income. Paths are unstandardized DWLS estimates based on both observed and latent variables; p values: *** (<.001), n.s. (not significant).

in misinformation and populist attitudes; however, our analysis revealed no significant moderation effects (see Appendix, Table 4). These findings support our decision to study institutional trust as a dependent variable, even though trust can also be used as an independent variable in future research.

Discussion and conclusions

This study investigated the impact of populist attitudes and votes, as well as misinformation beliefs, on people's trust in political and expert institutions – specifically, trust in their ability to handle a future health crisis – comparing four countries which were all led by populist leaders during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Choosing this design, we attempted to add to the existing understanding of mechanisms that play a role in building and sustaining institutional trust, focusing particularly on two phenomena that shape contemporary political and information environments, namely populism and misinformation. Unlike majority of studies in this area, we treated trust as a dependent variable, and – rather than using generic trust indicators – examined potential shifts in trust in relation to a particular future scenario, derived from people's experience with the recent global health crisis (which was still ongoing at the time of data collection).

Our findings reveal important similarities as well as differences in both the levels of prospective institutional trust and its relationship with the selected systemic and individual-level variables across the four countries, underlining the significance of accounting for the local context and country-level differences in the management of the pandemic. As a starting point of our investigation, we have determined that people in all four countries tend to trust (rather than distrust) experts/health care professionals to handle a future pandemic, and that trust in experts is notably higher than trust in political institutions in this regard. This is, in itself, perhaps not too surprising, but it does indicate that despite attempts by populist leaders in some of those countries, especially Brazil and the US, to question science and expert-based knowledge during the pandemic, the majority of people did not lose their trust in experts to deal with a future health crisis. However, our data show that people susceptible to misinformation beliefs as well as those displaying populist attitudes are significantly less likely to trust experts, confirming that these two factors need to be considered as systemic risks, potentially jeopardizing science-based approaches to mitigate the impact of future health crises. On the other hand, we observe a clear, cross-country alignment between (prospective) trust and declared (retrospective) support for government's pandemic measures; in other words, support for policies adopted by the government to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic is the strongest predictor of institutional trust, both for political and expert institutions. Therefore, when comparing the influence of systemic factors (in this case, misinformation and populism) and past performance of institutions on people's trust in institutional response to future health crises, the latter appear to have a more robust impact.

Misinformation beliefs, populist attitudes and policy support appear to have a similar impact on trust in all the four countries. Contrastingly, voting for populist leaders does not display homogeneous associations with trust across the sample. In the US and Brazil, it correlates negatively with expert trust, while in Poland and Serbia, the correlation is positive. Regarding political trust, the relationship is again positive in Poland and Serbia, but negative in the US (with Brazil displaying no significant correlation). This seemingly counter-intuitive finding might be explained by different attitudes to experts and science by populist leaders in the respective countries, as well as by policy approaches adopted by them when responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, as summarized earlier in this paper. Given that both Polish and Serbian leaders adopted largely science-based mitigation measures, and adhered to expert advice (at least in the initial phases of the pandemic), they did not create a rupture between expert and political institutions that would potentially nurture hostile perceptions of expert institutions by their voters (who therefore display congruence between both types of trust in our study). This was, however, not the case in the United States and Brazil, where presidents Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro systematically and consciously delegitimized science and engaged in promoting pandemic misinformation, thereby possibly contributing to the weakening of their voters' trust in expert institutions, particularly with regards to their ability to handle future pandemic. Nevertheless, due to the cross-sectional nature of our study, we are unable to determine the direction of causality in this relationship; this means it is also possible that the distrust in expert institutions, displayed by populist voters in Brazil and the US, are reflecting pre-existing negative perceptions of these institutions. At the time of data collection (November – December 2022), populist governments were still in power in Poland and Serbia, while they had already been voted out in the US and Brazil.

Because of this timing, we cannot exclude the possibility that responses regarding institutional trust were driven by the populist voters' sentiments towards the incumbent President (or, in case of Brazil, President-elect) – even though this would better explain the observed differences in political trust, rather than in expert trust, with the latter being arguably more difficult to link to the momentary political constellation in either of these countries. In either case, we take these findings as inspiration for future research, which should address more explicitly the question to what extent has the populist leaders' communication and policies during the pandemic affected voting behaviour, and whether and to what extent this contributed to the re-election of populist incumbents in Poland and Serbia (both elections held in June 2020), and to their defeat in the United States (November 2020) and in Brazil (October 2022).

Alongside with these empirical findings, our study brings an important conceptual contribution, pointing to different dimensions of institutional trust, and calling for keeping these dimensions separate in future research. Though trust in political and expert institutions covariate, we have established that they can have opposite relationships with some of the key independent variables. Most notably, while misinformation beliefs are positively correlated with trust in political institutions, they are also negatively linked with trust in medical experts and science. News access is associated with higher trust in health authorities, scientists and medical professionals, but it is not a significant predictor of trust in politicians and governments in most of the countries in our sample – except for the United States.

Finally, we need to acknowledge several limitations of the study. As already mentioned, the study's cross-sectional design constraints its ability to provide conclusive evidence regarding causality of the relationship between dependent and independent variables; a longitudinal approach would certainly have been more fruitful in this respect, even if it is more difficult to plan in the context of the (still ongoing) pandemic. The future-oriented exploration of trust, while constituting a methodological innovation, inevitably brings along the question of accuracy of responses, given its hypothetical character – something we strived to mitigate by asking about a specific scenario attached to the performance of particular institutions, which most respondents had a direct experience with at the time of the survey (or close to it). The sample of only four countries certainly enabled for more in-depth interpretations of the observed similarities and differences. However, this limits generalizability, especially concerning the impact of populism on institutional trust in the context of health crises. As populism varies in form and shape, future research should strive to represent greater variety of populist governments and actors, such as left-wing populism. Additionally, studies should expand beyond the scope of countries with populists in power, comparing them with those characterized by mainstream democratic governments, as well as with illiberal or authoritarian regimes, to better ascertain the impact of populism.

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