



# **The value of national and comparative data on social attitudes**

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## Why bother?

Surely policy and social change is about changing behaviour or circumstances, not attitudes

Aren't attitudes too fickle, context-dependant and 'cheap' to measure well?

Aren't individual attitudes too mutually inconsistent to mean anything much?

The 'prevalence vs salience' conundrum

The 'satisfaction' conundrum

## Monitoring changing social attitudes...

- ...helps explain how we see our world and ourselves;  
deciphers changes in the socio-political climate
- ...challenges entrenched myths and stereotypes  
about our society and how it works
- ...exposes society's political and cultural  
divisions, eg unequal opportunities,  
intolerance
- ...helps predict impending changes in behaviour

## Methodological checks and balances

Sampling and response rates

Validating questions & scales

Accessible & relevant vocabulary and concepts

Event monitoring

Balancing innovation against consistency

Making links with other studies worldwide

## 3 ways in which societies change over time

### *Cohort (or generational) effects:*

As young people get older, they retain their distinctive values or behaviour patterns. So society changes over time in consequence

[eg religiosity and permissiveness]

### *Life cycle effects:*

As young people get older, they become more like their elders are now [eg interest in politics]

### *Period effects:*

All sections of society change in a similar direction [eg attitudes to abortion]

## What can data on other countries add?

Exposes differences and similarities

“Comparative sociology is not a particular branch of sociology. It is sociology itself.” *Durkheim*

Aids cross-national governance

Demonstrates that within-country differences are usually at least as large as between-country differences

But comparisons are ideally needed not only between countries, also over time

# Obstacles to cross-national social measurement

Cultural incompatibilities, inc the language barrier

Breaching the 'principle of equivalence'

Danger of league tables gaining precedence over serious analysis

Clash between optimising standards and achieving consistency

Differences in methodological capacity

Differences in methodological 'habits'

## Surmounting the obstacles

Avoid ‘safari method’, but try to harmonise sampling and data collection methods

Aim, often in vain, for language and concept equivalence

Insist on meticulous documentation

The need for plenty of contextual variables



## The European Social Survey – an example

Multinational time series, started 2001

34 countries so far

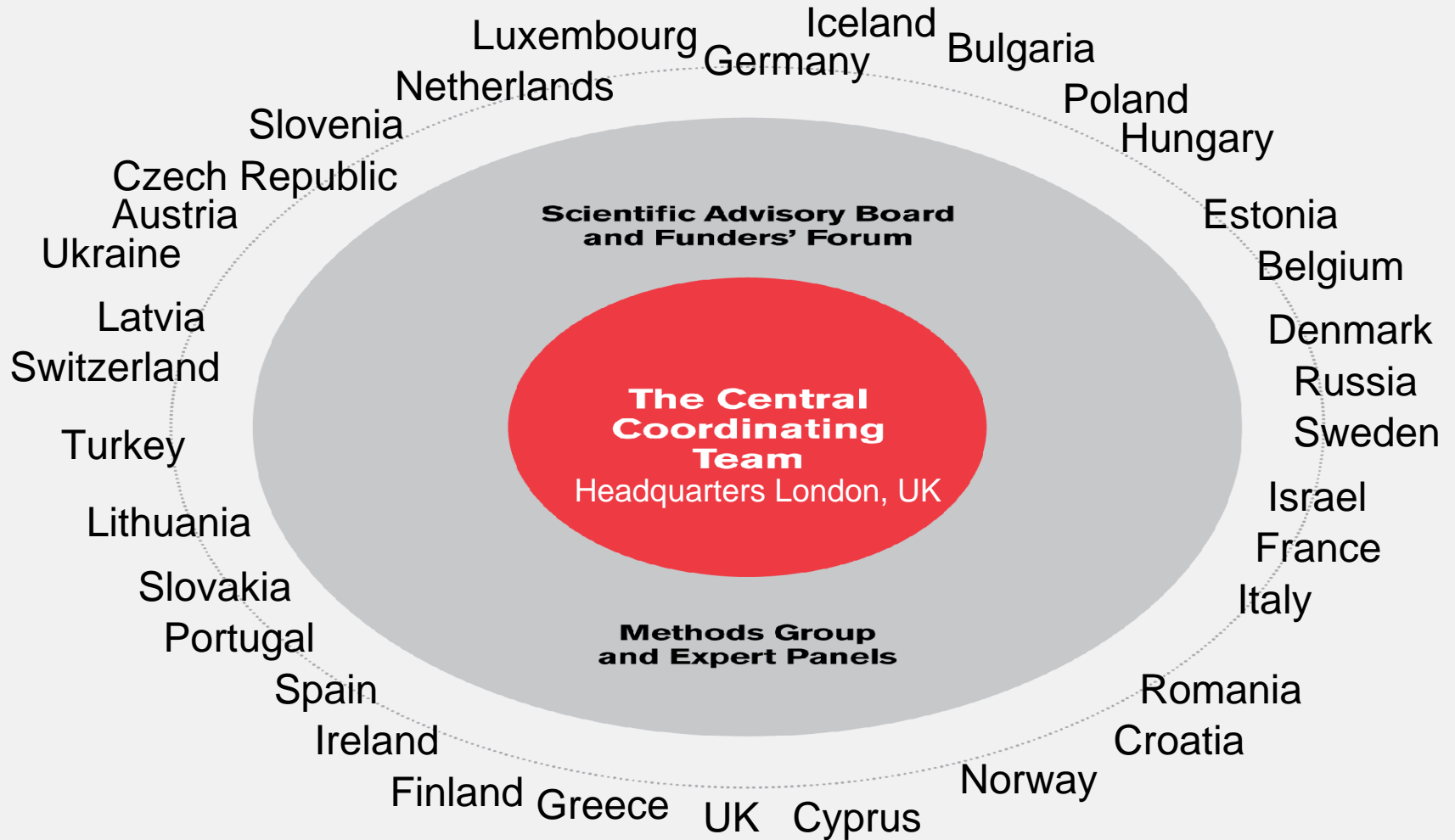
Contributes to scholarship and governance

Large training component and potential

Several substantive and methodological innovations

Widespread usage (32,000 registered users, 24 books in several languages, many journal articles, countless conference papers)

# ESS Countries



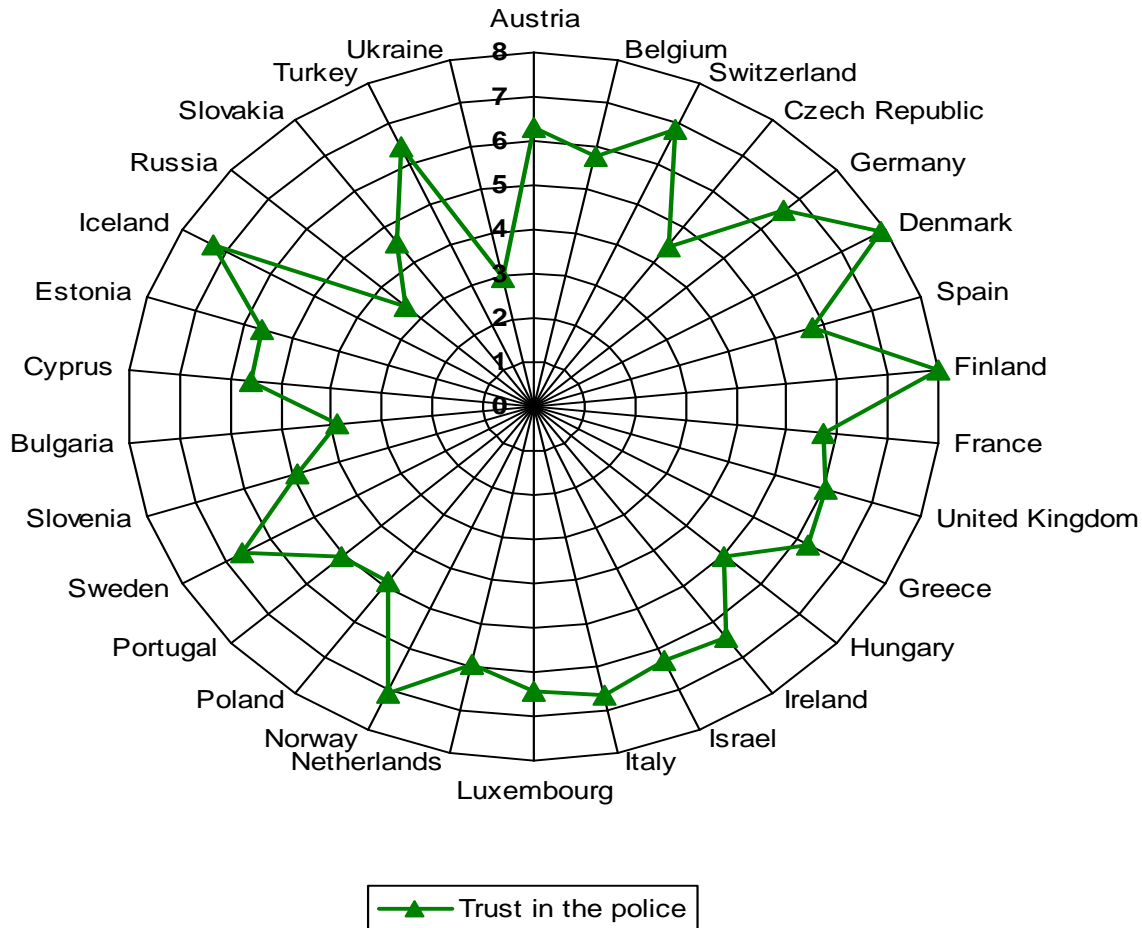
## ESS question clusters – some core, some rotating

Trust in institutions  
Citizen engagement  
Socio-political values  
Immigration  
Moral & social attitudes  
Quality of life  
Crime and security  
Value orientations  
Perceptions of police &  
criminal justice

National, ethnic, religious ID  
Health and welfare issues  
Life course perceptions  
Ageism  
Work and family life  
Evaluations of democracy  
Education and occupation  
Financial circumstances  
Household circumstances  
Demographic composition

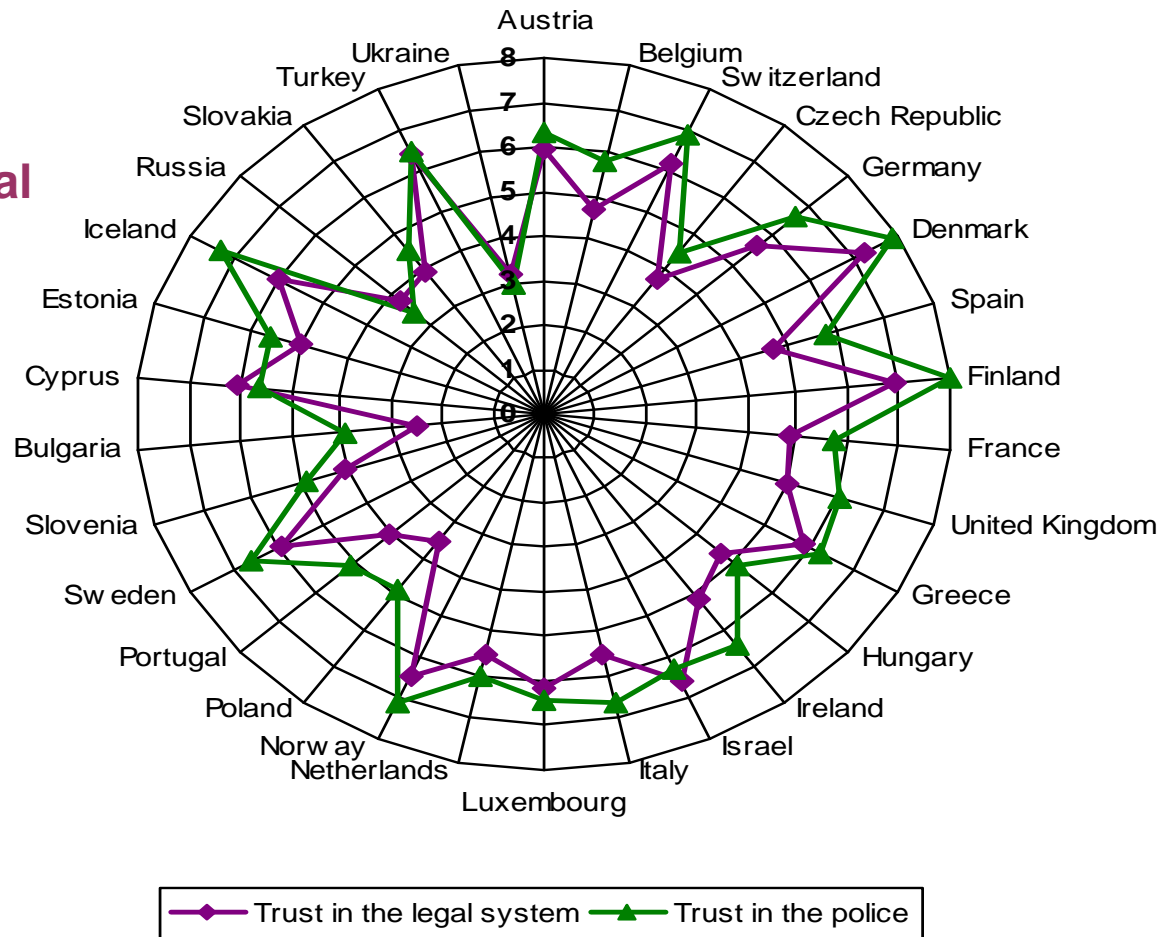
# Four dimensions of institutional trust...

Trust in the police varies but is high...



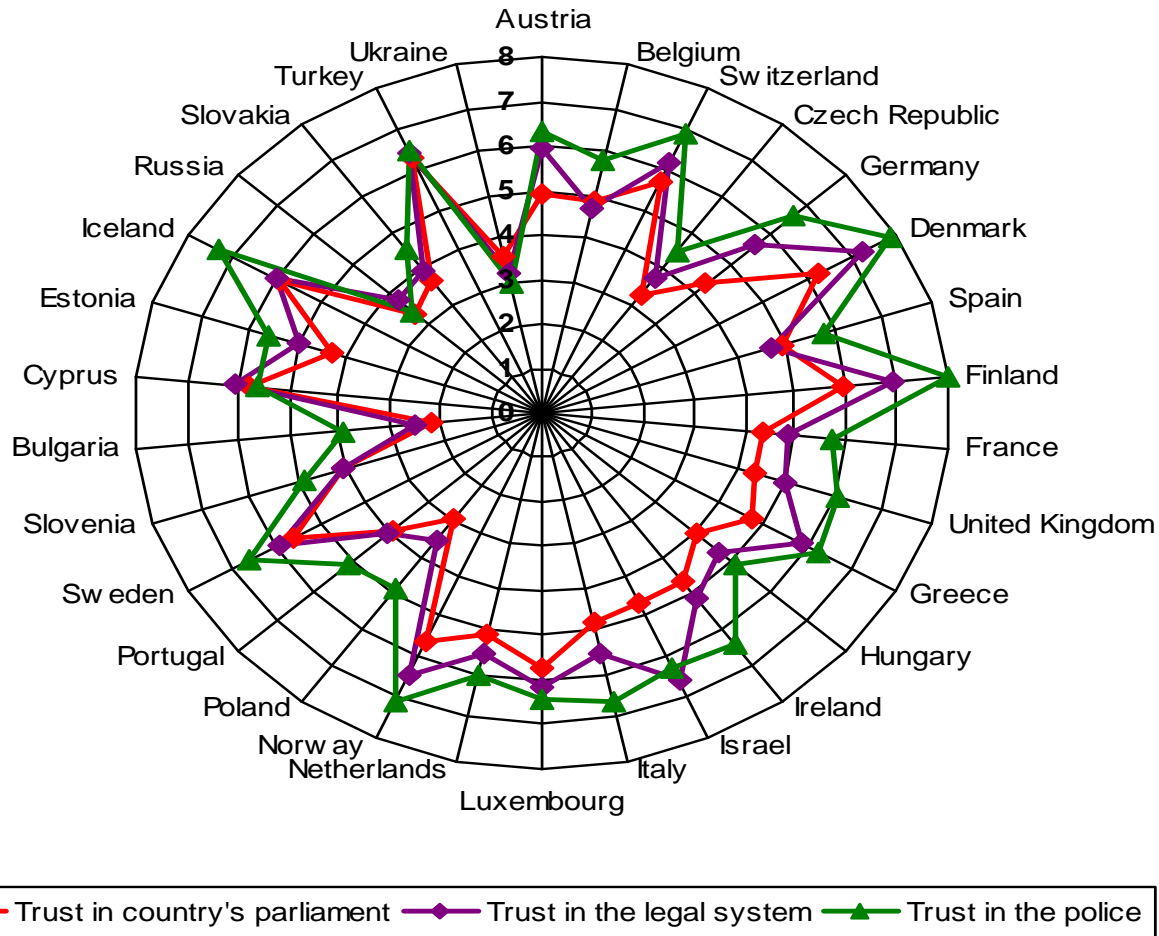
# Four dimensions of institutional trust...

Trust in the legal system is lower....

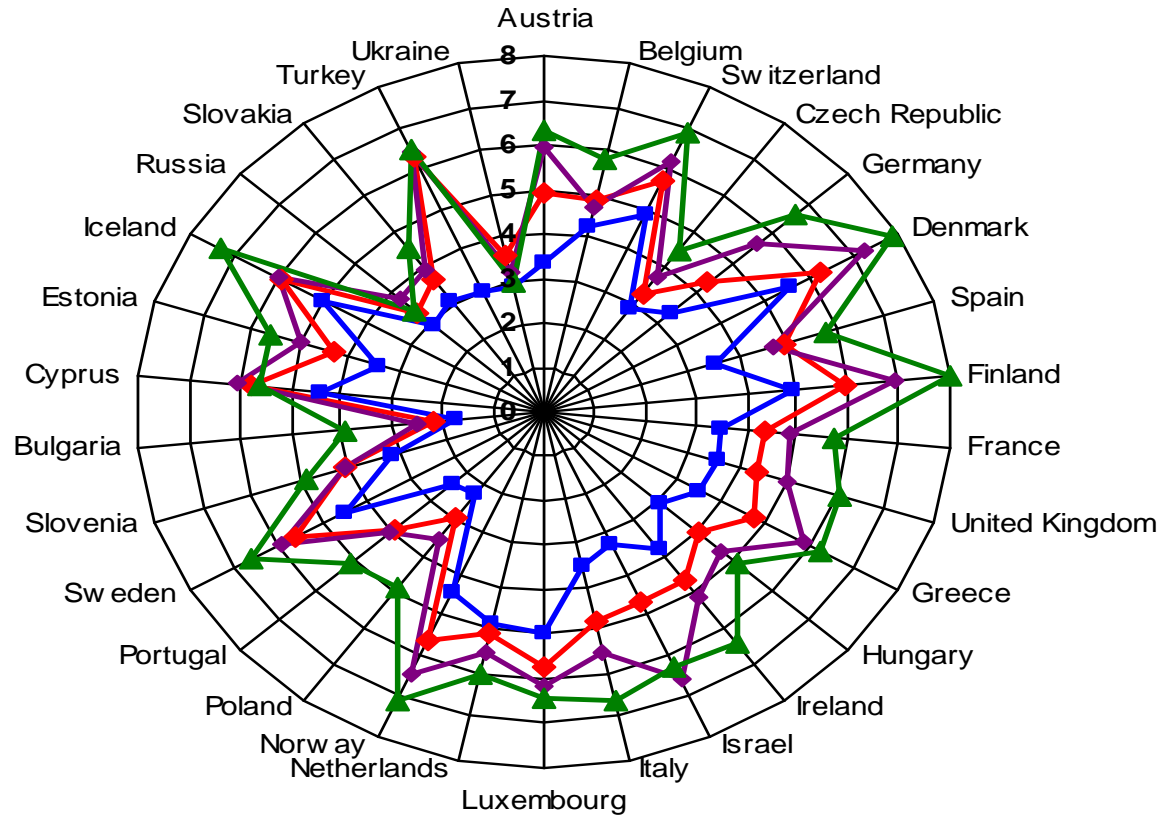


# Four dimensions of institutional trust...

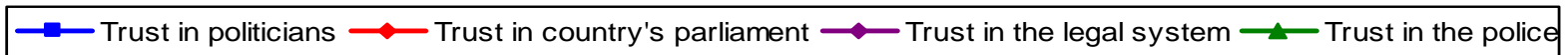
Trust in national parliaments is lower still...



# Four dimensions of institutional trust...



Trust in politicians is the lowest of all.



## Attitudes to migration

Surges of xenophobia associated with economic downturns

So present dangers of recession

But education matters

More education = less xenophobia, greater sympathy towards cultural diversity, greater acceptance of *all* newcomers, even of potential labour market competitors



# The good news is that education matters in all sorts of ways, eg

## Education and Interest in Politics in 22 countries

