

Trust in Politics, Politicians and Institutions

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Key Point:

About one in ten people in Ireland have 'No trust at all' in politicians or political parties and just over a quarter have relatively high levels of trust, as measured by the European Social Survey in 2018-19. These levels of trust in politicians and political parties are far lower than in relation to other institutions such as the Gardaí or the legal system. Distrust of politicians is relatively high in Ireland, compared to other western European democracies, although lower than in Italy, France and the United Kingdom. Lack of trust in politicians increased during the recession, peaking in 2012, but distrust has fallen somewhat in recent years. Trust in political parties varies greatly by political preferences. Those who gave their first preference vote to Sinn Féin in the 2016 General Election seem particularly sceptical of political parties: 23% of them have no trust at all in political parties, as do 17% of those who voted for independent candidates.

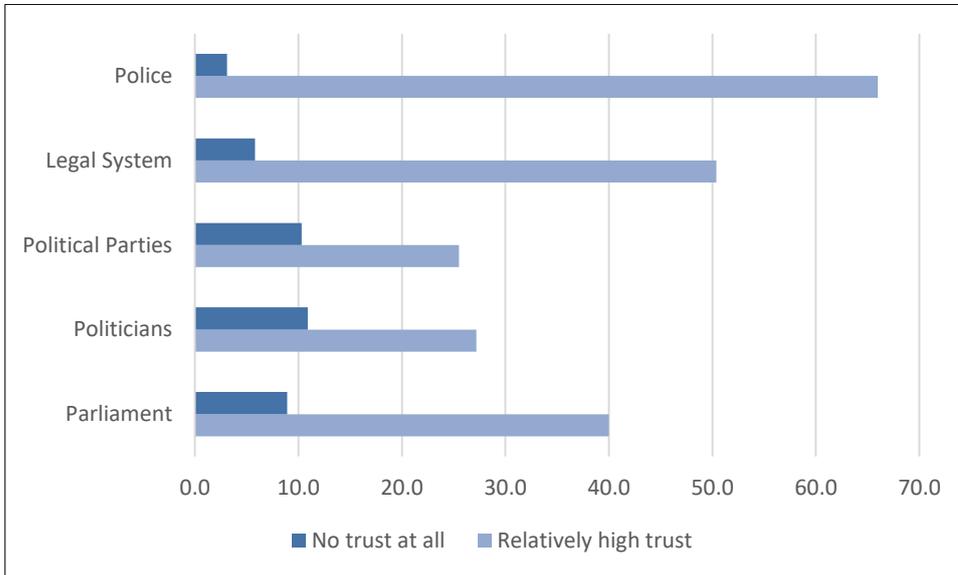
The European Social Survey

These indicators of trust were collected as part of the European Social Survey (ESS), which is an academically driven cross-national survey that has been conducted across Europe since 2002. Face-to-face interviews with people aged 15 years or over are conducted every two years to examine attitudes, beliefs and behaviour patterns of diverse populations in over 30 countries. The 9th Round of ESS was coordinated in Ireland in 2018-19 at the UCD Geary Institute for Public Policy with funding from the Irish Research Council. The data were collected by Behaviour & Attitudes from over 2,200 individuals.

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Figure 1 shows that about two thirds of people have relatively high levels of trust in the Gardaí, scoring 6 or above in an 11-point scale ranging from 0 - 'No trust at all', to 11- 'Complete trust'. About 50% of people have relatively high levels of trust in the legal system. However, trust in politicians and political institutions is far lower. Over 10% of people respond that they have no trust at all in either politicians or political parties and just over one-quarter have relatively high levels of trust in politicians or political parties. Just 40% have relatively high levels of trust in the Dáil.

Figure 1: % Indicating No Trust and Relatively High Levels of Trust in Political Actors and Institutions, 2018-19



Source: ESS (2019)

Figure 2: % Indicating Relatively High Levels of Trust in Politics and Institutions

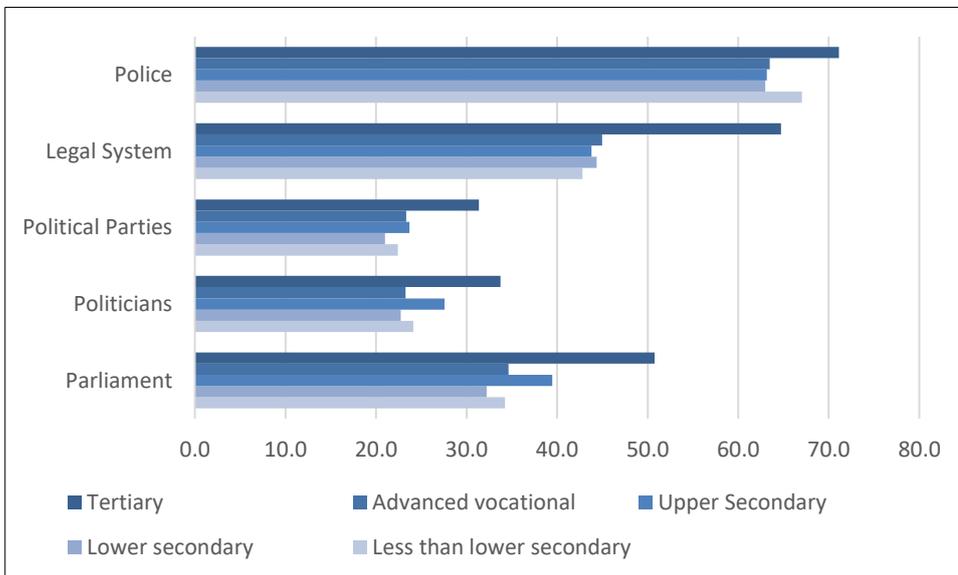
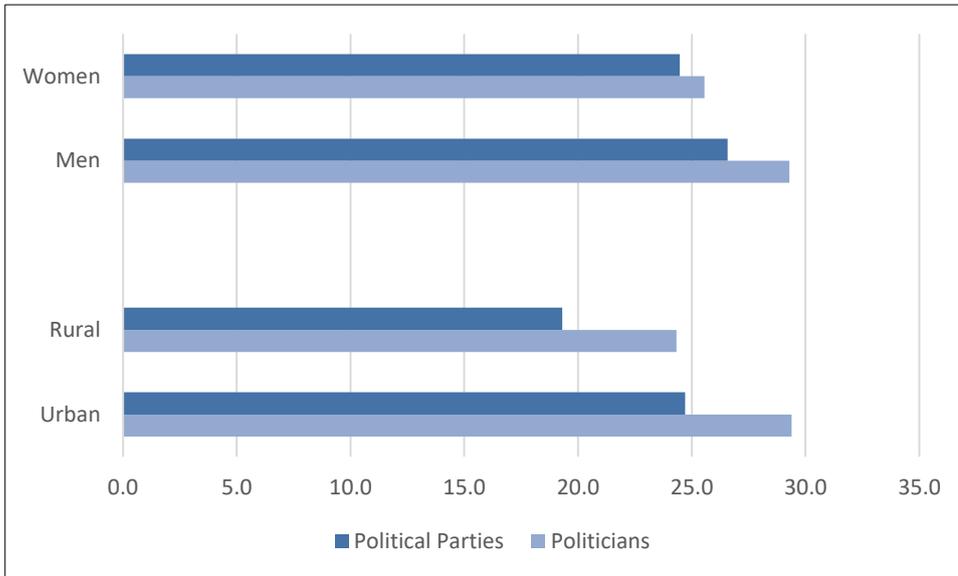


Figure 2 shows levels of trust in political actors and institutions by level of educational attainment. In general, levels of trust are greater among those with higher levels of education: there is a clear demarcation between those with tertiary education and the other levels of education. Nevertheless, the comparatively low levels of trust in politicians is replicated across all educational levels. While 71% of those with tertiary

education have relatively high levels of trust in the Gardaí, only 31% have high levels of trust in political parties; and while 63% of those with lower secondary education have high levels of trust in the Gardaí, just 21% have trust in political parties.

Figure 3: % Indicating Relatively High Levels of Trust in Politicians and Political Parties



Men and women differ little in trust for politicians and political parties. However, urban dwellers tend to be more trusting of political actors: 29% of those in urban areas have relatively high levels of trust in politicians, compared to just 24% of rural dwellers.

Figure 4: Trust in Politicians in Long-established Western European Democracies

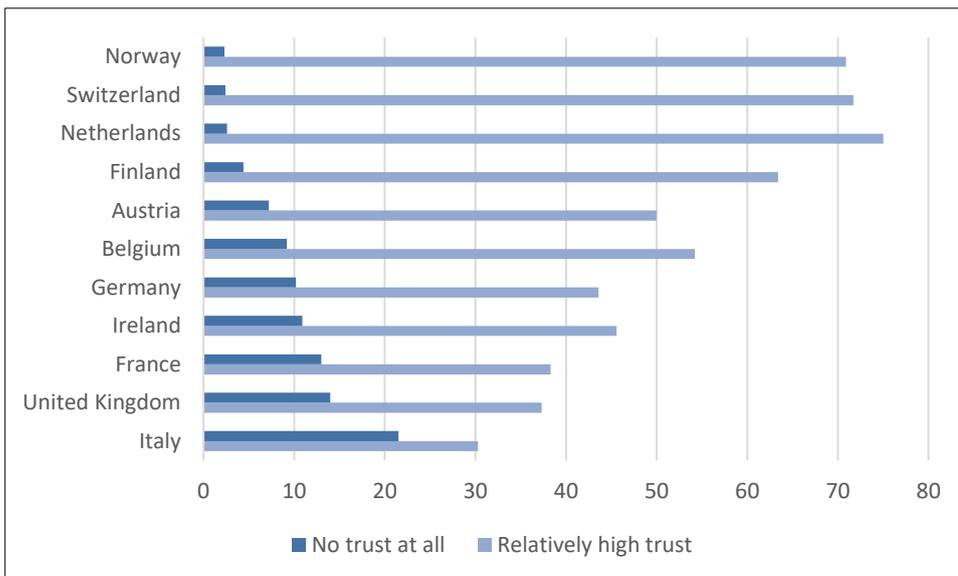
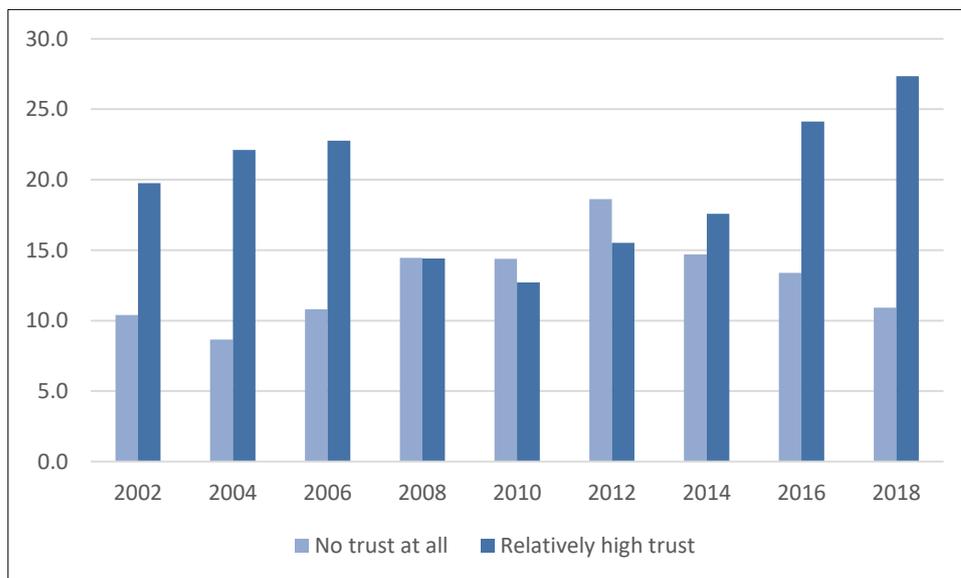


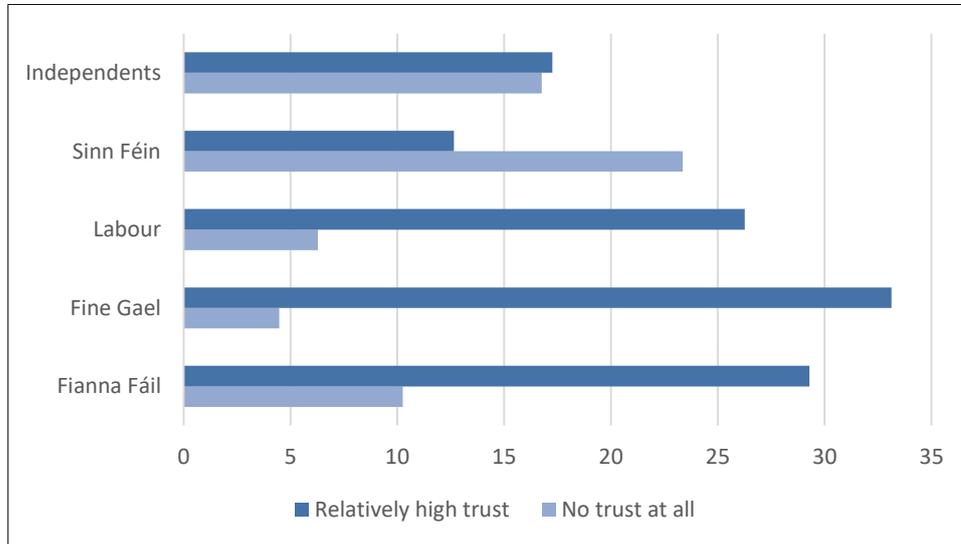
Figure 4 shows levels of trust in politicians in eleven long-established Western European democracies for which ESS data are available from the 2018-19 survey. In terms of lack of trust in politicians, Ireland lies in the upper half of the distribution. While almost 11% of respondents in Ireland express no trust in politicians, this is true of less than 3% in Norway, Switzerland and the Netherlands, and of 4% in Finland. However, 13% of those in France, 14% in the United Kingdom, and over 21% in Italy have no trust in politicians. Conversely, just four countries, Germany, France, UK and Italy, have lower proportions than in Ireland expressing relatively high levels of trust in politicians.

Figure 5: Trends over Time in Trust for Politicians in Ireland



Trust in politicians appears to vary with macroeconomic conditions. The proportion of people in Ireland who express relatively high levels of trust in politicians increased between 2002 and 2006, during the economic boom. Trust declined sharply during the Great Recession, hitting a low point in 2012 when almost 19% of respondents had no trust at all in politicians, and just 15% indicated relatively high levels of trust. Since then the proportion indicating no trust has fallen below 11% while those expressing relatively high levels of trust has increased to over 27%.

Figure 6: Trust in Political Parties by party of first preference vote in 2016 General Election



There is a great deal of variation in trust in political parties by political preference. Comparatively small proportions of those who gave their first-preference vote to the traditional centrist parties (Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour) in the 2016 General Election tend to indicate ‘No trust at all’ in political parties (less than 5% in the case of Fine Gael first-preference voters, just over 10% of Fianna Fail voters). Those who gave their first preference vote to Sinn Féin in 2016 seem particularly sceptical of political parties: 23% of them have no trust at all in political parties in 2018-19. Perhaps not surprisingly, 17% of those who voted for Independents indicate that they have no trust at all in political parties. At the other extreme of the trust measure, 33% of Fine Gael voters have relatively high levels of trust in political parties, as do almost 30% of Fianna Fáil voters. Less than 13% of Sinn Féin first preference voters have relatively high levels of trust in political parties, as do 17% of voters for independents.

References

European Social Survey Cumulative File, ESS 1-9 (2019). Data file edition 1.0. NSD – Norwegian Centre for Research Data, Norway – Data Archive and distributor of ESS data for ESS ERIC. doi:[10.21338/NSD-ESS-CUMULATIVE](https://doi.org/10.21338/NSD-ESS-CUMULATIVE).