

Kastryčnicki Ekanamičny Forum

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# KEF-2017: Foundations of the future

Trust in numbers: Values and impressions in a  
comparative European perspective

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# Trust in numbers: Values and impressions in a comparative European perspective

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1. Meanings and measurements
2. European patterns
3. NL: Citizens' perspectives
4. Correlates of political trust
5. Conclusions and consequences

# 1. Meanings



Trust in theory (and in private life):

- Relational, situational, specific
- Something serious, even dramatic

Trust in surveys:

- Answer to 'How much do you trust?'
- A general attitude, or impression



## Generalized social trust

Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?

- ☐ Most people can be trusted
- ☐ Can't be too careful
- ☐ Don't know

(Noelle-Neumann (1948) - Rosenberg (1956) – Almond/Verba (1963) – EVS / WVS ... ..)

Trust vs. caution = Self-assurance vs. feelings of vulnerability



# **Institutional/political trust**

In general no specifications to dimensions of trust (such as competence, integrity, benevolence)

‘I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain institutions. For each of the following institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it’

‘How much trust do you currently have in the following institutions using a scale from 1 to 10 where [1] means ‘you do not trust the institution at all’ and [10] means ‘you trust it completely’



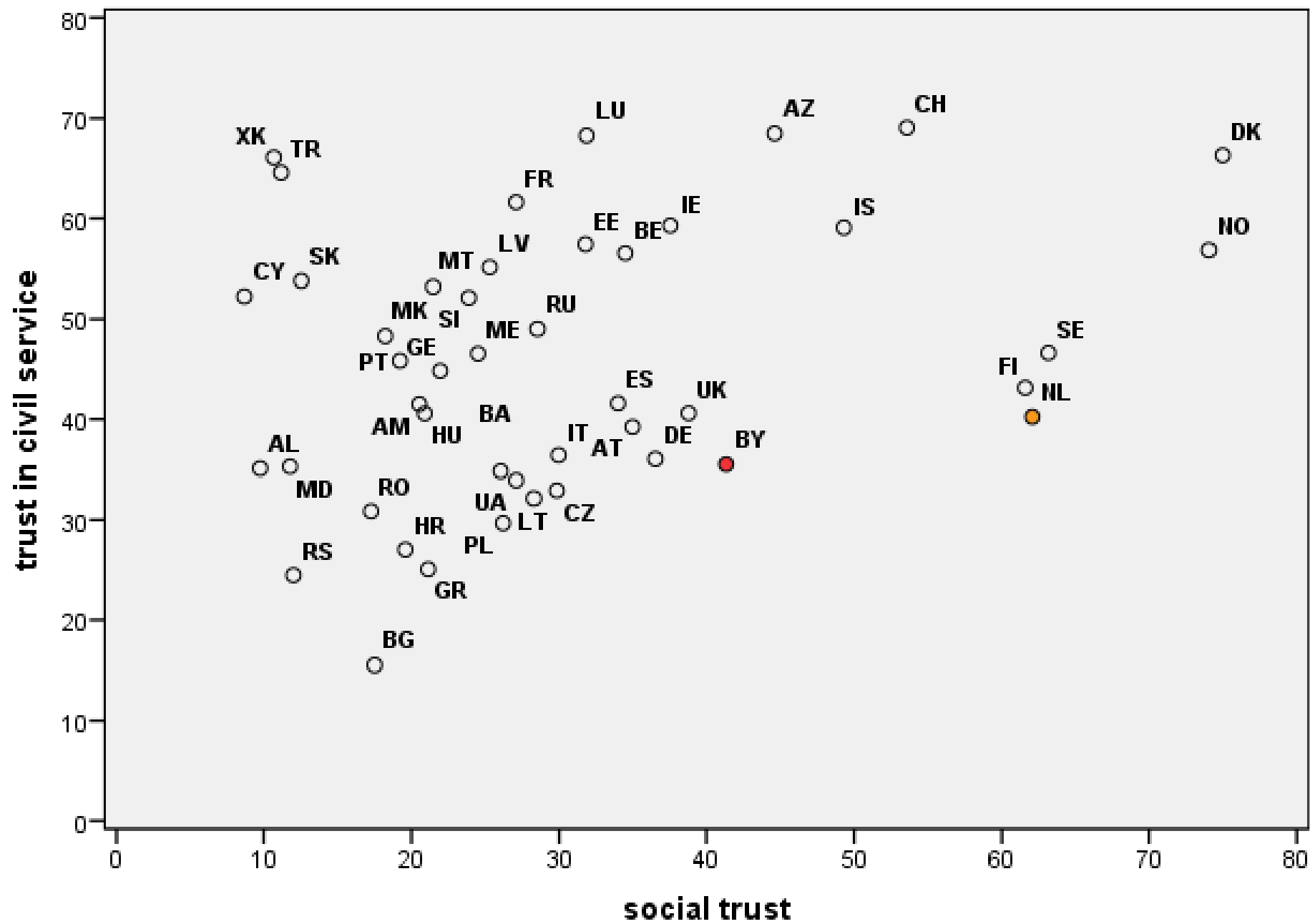
*“... a wide gap between much of the theoretical and conceptual work on trust and the bulk of empirical studies. Much of the recent empirical work on trust – be it based on surveys or experiments – does not seem to proceed from any clear account of what is meant by trust in the first place. Rather, trust is taken to be what is measured by one or more survey questions.” Nannestad (2008: 415)*

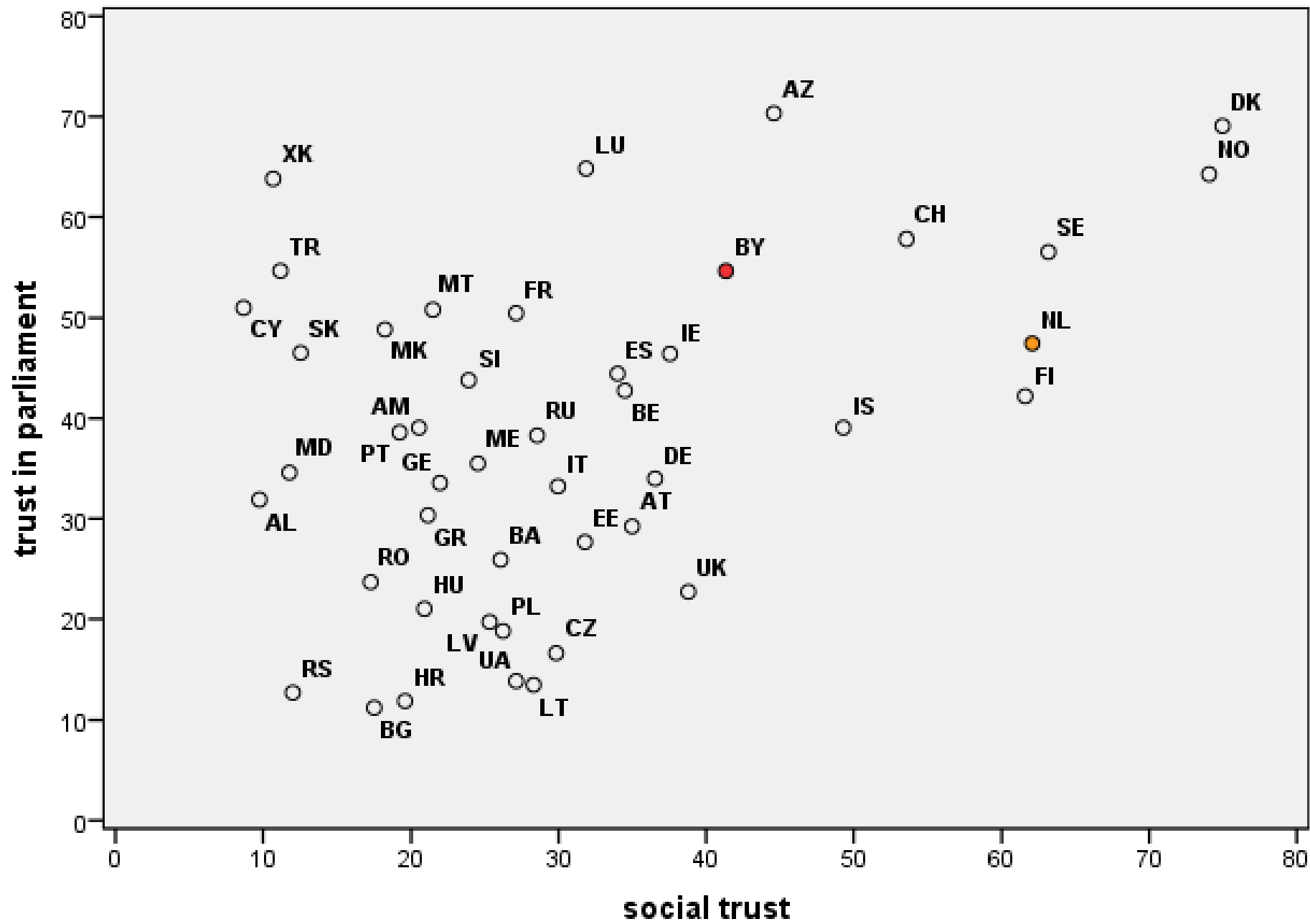
## 2. Patterns

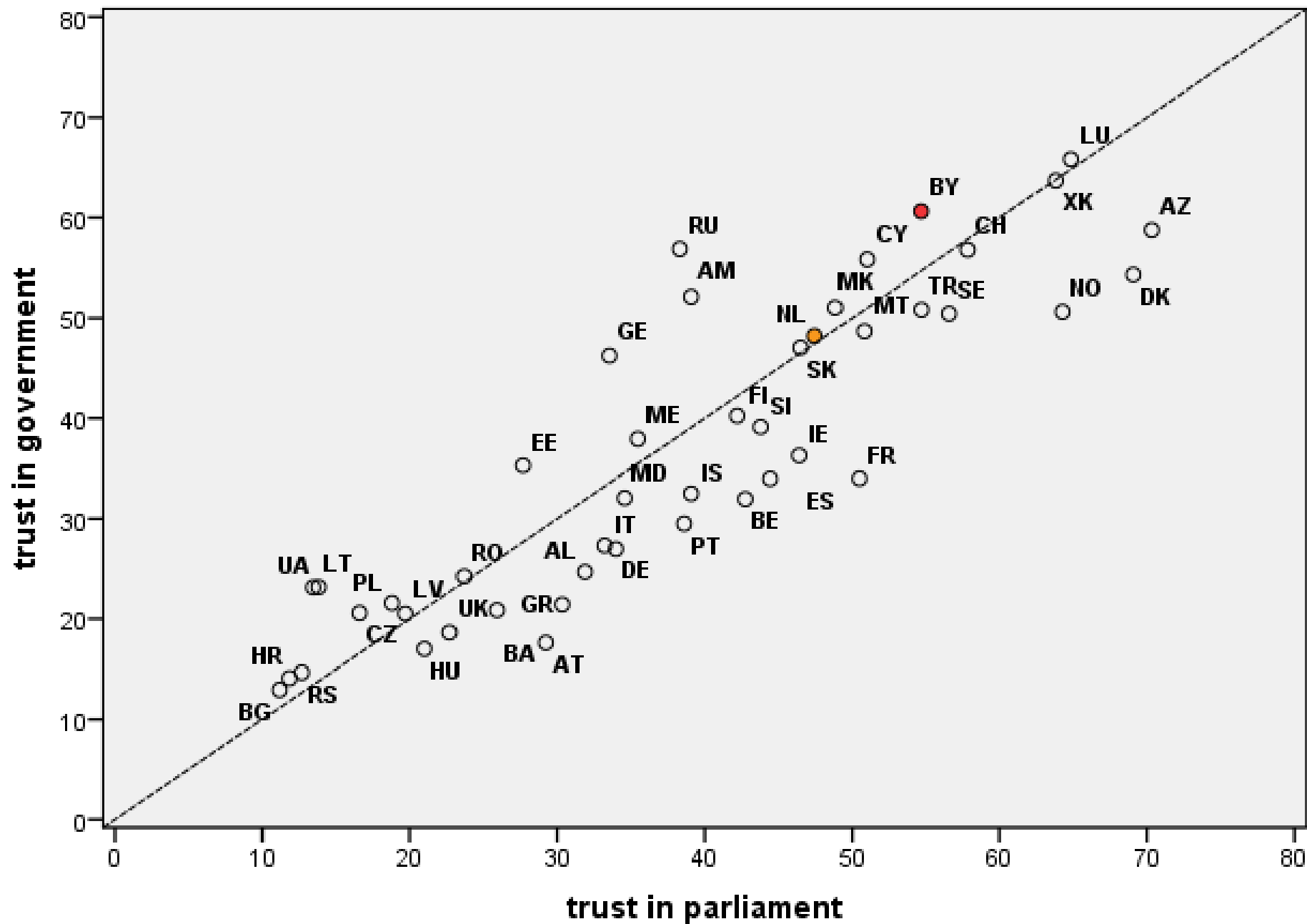


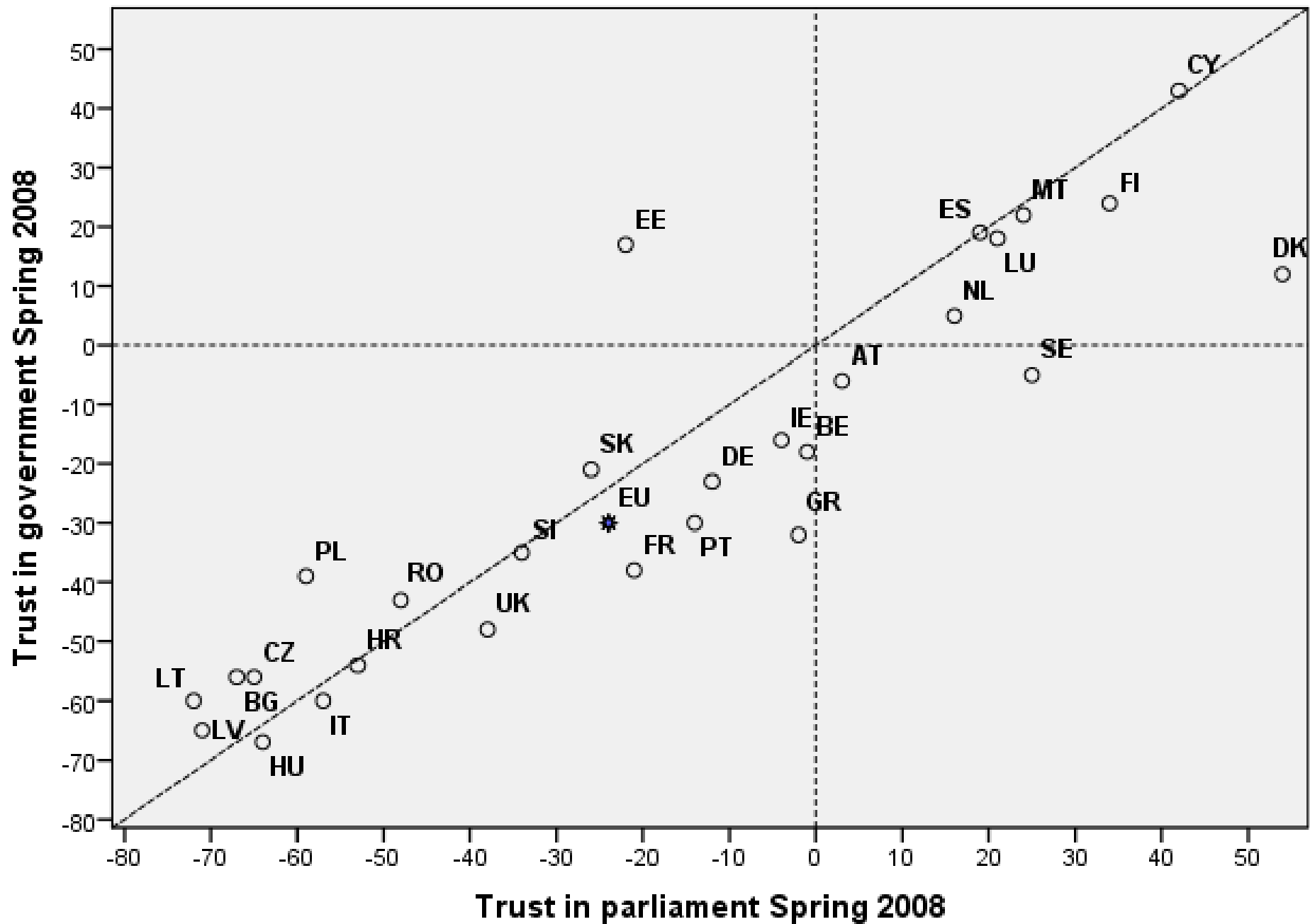
- EVS 2008/9 (including Belarus): social and political trust in Europe
- Eurobarometer 2008-2017: political trust in the European Union

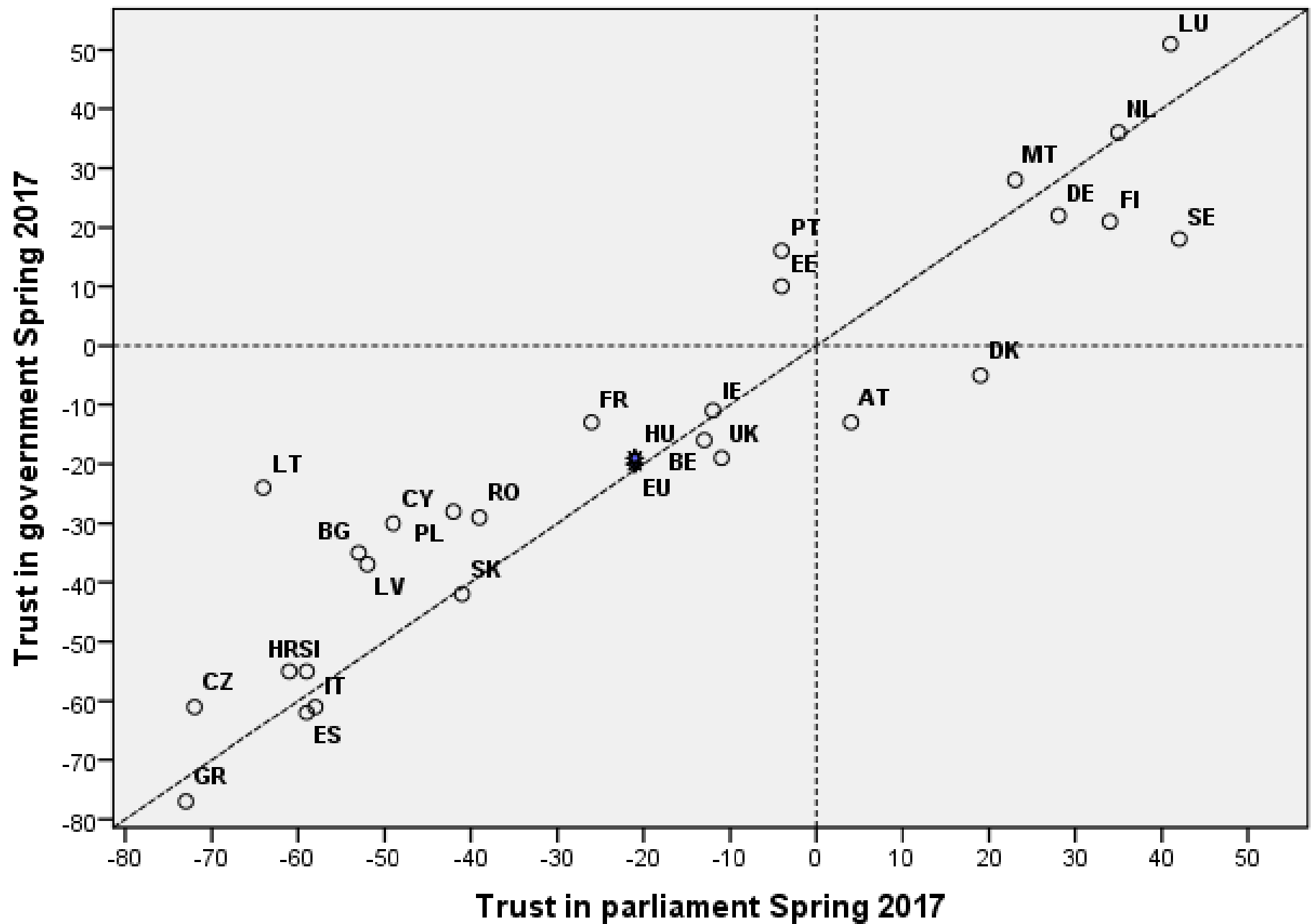


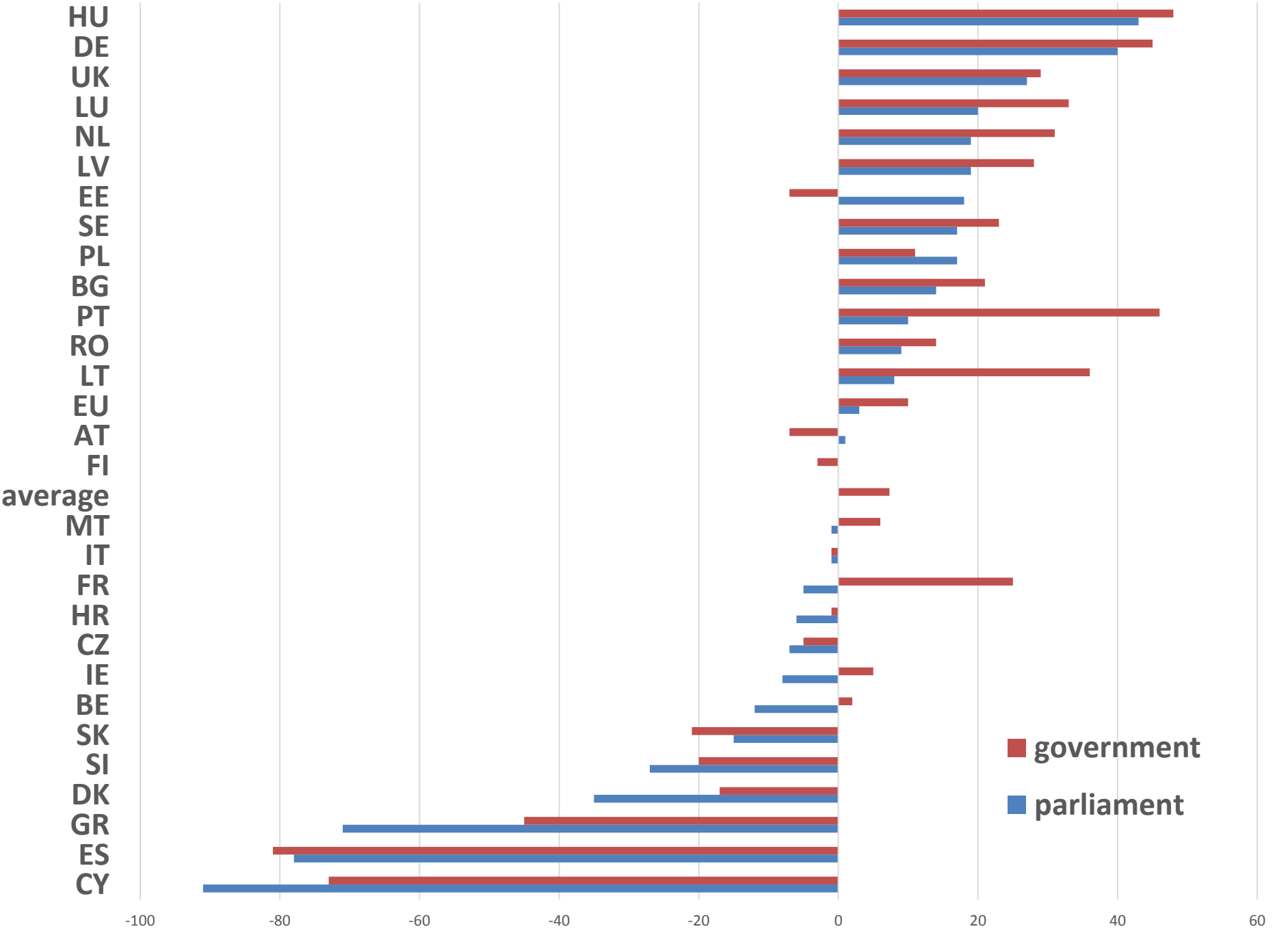












# 3. Netherlands

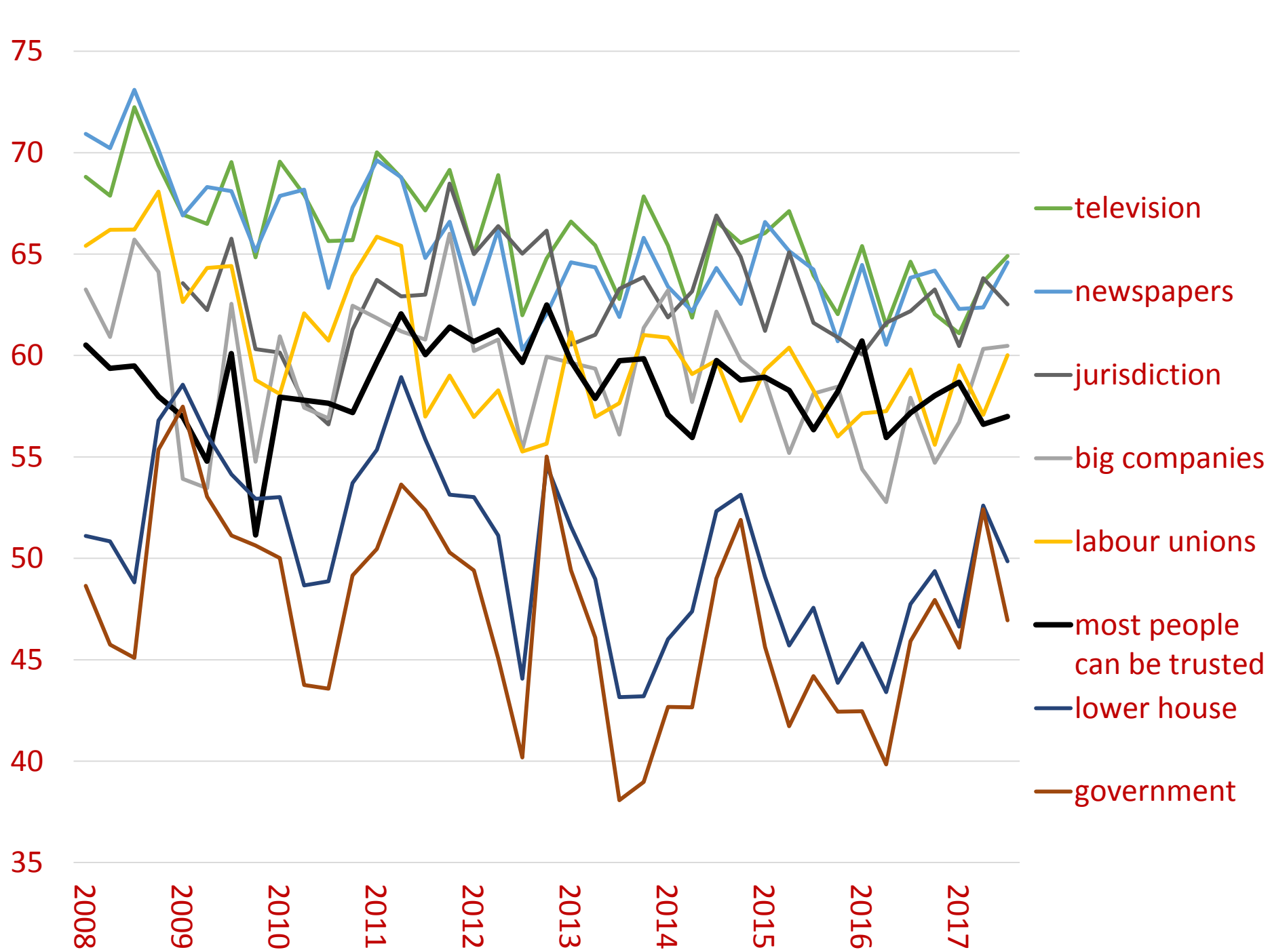


- Citizens' Outlooks Barometer (COB)
- Individual interviews in pilot: “It’s a difficult word” / “It isn’t the right word”
- Survey: 10-points measurements + questions to explain scores
- Focus groups: questions + discussion
- Result: Large variety of criteria / Differences between institutions

## From the pilot interviews:

I.	What is it then, really, trust? What is it that makes Parliament or the government trustworthy or not trustworthy?
A.	If they're doing things right, I suppose. Yes, trust, trust..... it's a difficult word, that; I only trust myself
I.	OK, but if you see a question like that in a questionnaire, and you give a score for trust in the government...
A.	Well, I don't give them a high score, I can tell you that.
I.	But what do you base your score on? How do you arrive at that figure?
A.	I watch the news, of course. ... . Some of the things they come out with, I think to myself, what's that got to do with anything, what's it about, what are they all playing at?
I.	OK, so that doesn't fit with the word 'trust'. So what does? What would they have to do to make you trust them?
A.	Having good policies and then actually carrying them out; but ... ..Everything gets blamed on Parliament or the government, when in fact they often can't even do anything about it ... ..







## People explaining social trust:

### Reasons to trust:

- Morality/values: “And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them” (Luke 6:31) / “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Golden rule)
- Personality: I am a positive person.

### Reasons to distrust / to be careful: bad experiences

- Personal: I trusted someone, but ....
- Society: Look at the News, read the papers ....

Much longer stories: people would like to trust and want to explain why they cannot.



## Focus groups explaining institutional trust:

- Almost never anything explicit about trust. People combine opinions about the goals of institutions with views about their importance to society, their credibility, their long-term effectiveness, current results, and so on.
- The institutions presented to respondents are not assessed on the basis of corresponding criteria. Instead, different assessment criteria come to the fore.
- **Media**: truthful and balanced? Unions: able to defend ordinary people? **Big companies**: societal benefits? **Courts**: impartial and effective? **Politics**: most diffuse (empathy, effectiveness, general interest ...)

# 4. Political trust



- Often no difference between Parliament and government
- Wide variety of considerations (distrust: too much talk, do not care, no connection, no passion, no transparency, ...; trust: highest authority, not too bad)
- Basically a general impression/image



## Statistics on individual differences:

- Trust in general (institutional/social)
- Personality/mastery/efficacy
- Economy (more than personal financial outlooks: sociotropic vs. pocket book)
- Big issues/performance: multicultural society, health care, EU ....



## Statistics on country differences/changes:

- Differences between democracies mainly because of differences in good governance (low corruption, representative election systems etc.)
- Changes in countries mainly because of economic performance and outlooks



## Individual social and political trust and politics

- Social trust → Collective action → Good governance ( → institutional trust) (De Tocqueville, Almond/Verba, Putnam)
- Social trust → Institutional trust → Good governance (Almond/Verba)
- Good governance → Institutional trust → Social trust (Offe a.o. about post 1989 CEE)

# 5. Conclusions



- Superficial measures, no deep trust
- Be aware of short-term fluctuations
- Long-term trends not always down
- Arguments: asymmetry of morality/values & personality vs. bad experiences
- Research: risk of contributing to a 'crisis of trust' vs. chance of contributing to a more reflective public opinion





*“... I think there isn’t [even] very good evidence that we trust less. There is good evidence that we say that we trust less: we tell the pollsters, they tell the media, and the news that we say that we do not trust is then put into circulation. But saying repeatedly that we don’t trust no more shows that we trust less, than an echo shows the truth of the echoed words; still less does it show that others are less trustworthy. ... The supposed ‘crisis of trust’ may be more a matter of what we tell inquisitive pollsters than of any active refusal of trust, let alone of conclusive evidence of reduces trustworthiness. The supposed ‘crisis of trust’ is, I think, first and foremost a culture of suspicion.” (Onora O’Neill 2002: 44-45)*



Monitor & publish trust in surveys?

No: Pierre Bourdieu: “L’opinion publique n’existe pas”

Yes: Jeffrey Alexander: public opinion research as a ‘communicative institution’ in the public sphere



*“Publicized polls provide ‘hard data’ about the life world of the civil sphere, allowing it to be construed independently of other exigencies and institutions. Polls represent this life world as filled with reflection, as based on the responses of independent and thoughtful people. The very process of polling attributes to its interviewees rationality and sincerity, converting the members of civil society from a passive, voiceless, and potentially manipulable ‘mass’ into a collective actor with a voice and intelligence of its own.”*  
(Alexander 2006: 85)