

Rebuilding trust in a fractured world



UNU
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**Insights from the World Social Report
2025**

Patricia Justino | UNU-WIDER | September 2025

WORLD SOCIAL REPORT 2025

The erosion of trust is often what drives fragility itself



Trust in a changing world

Social cohesion and the social contract
in uncertain times

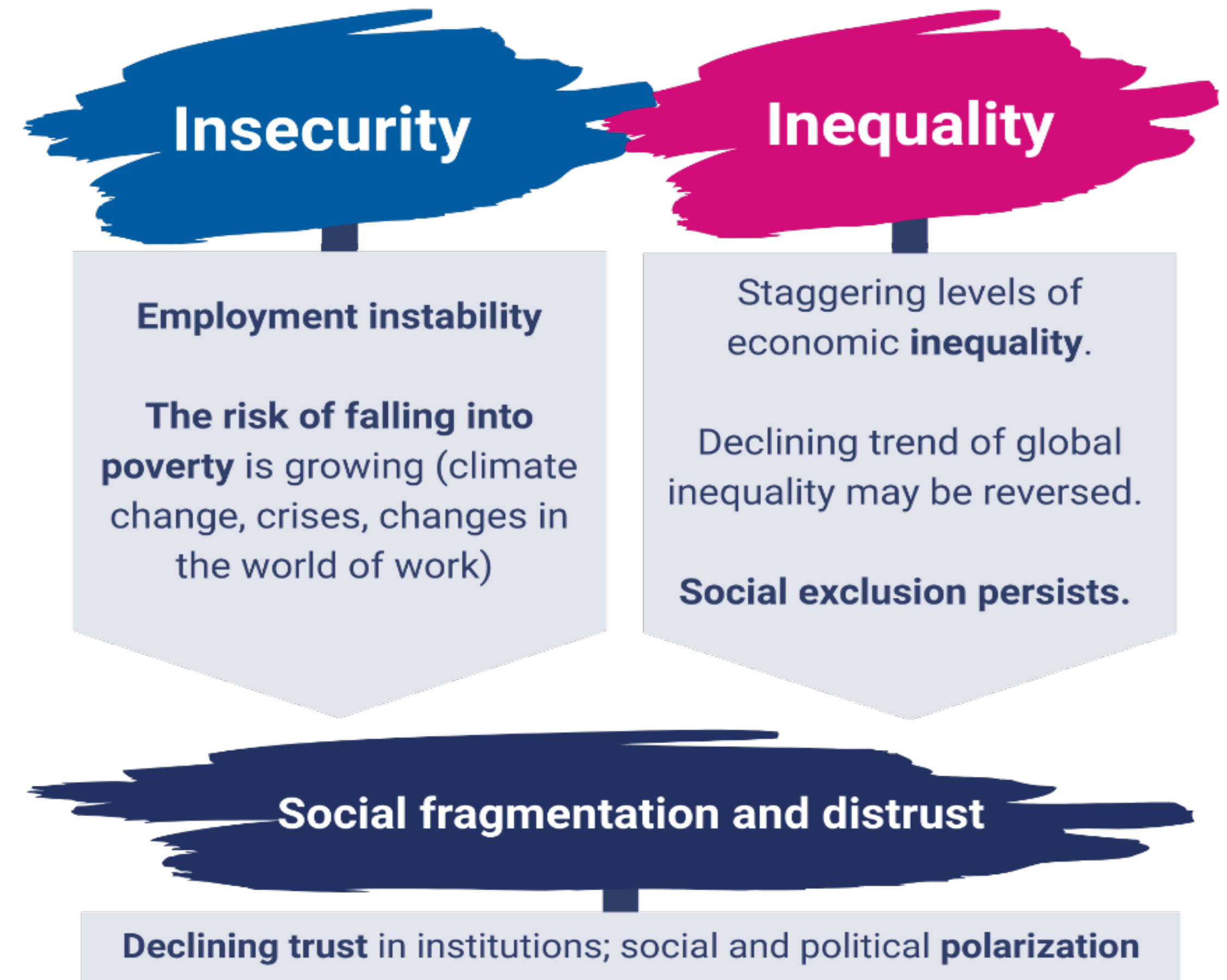
Patricia Justino and Melissa Samarin

May 2025

- Compilation of all available barometer data (Europe, LA and Africa plus WVS) between 2005-2022/23
- Analysis cover developed and developing countries
- Focus on impact of economic uncertainty since 2007-8 Great Recession on changes in trust levels
- Focus on four outcomes of the 'trust crisis': political participation and civic engagement; perceived levels of corruption; socio-political stability; and media transparency

A growing social crisis

Despite progress in many social indicators, **60% of people regard life as worse or the same compared to 50 years ago**

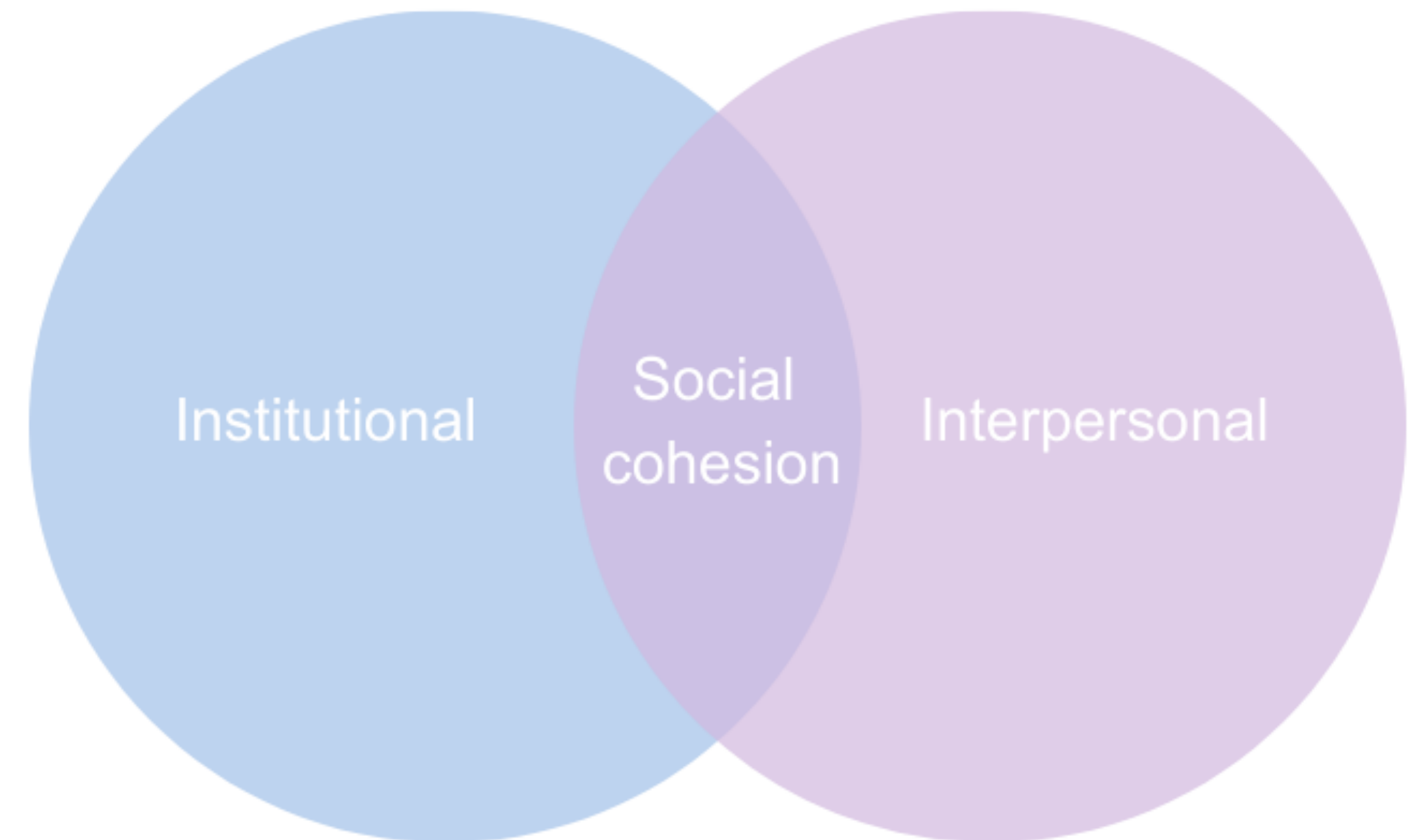


‘Trust is the expectation that others will act in ways that are beneficial or at least not harmful to us’

Institutional trust → confidence in governments, courts, police

Interpersonal trust → confidence in other people (family, neighbours, strangers)

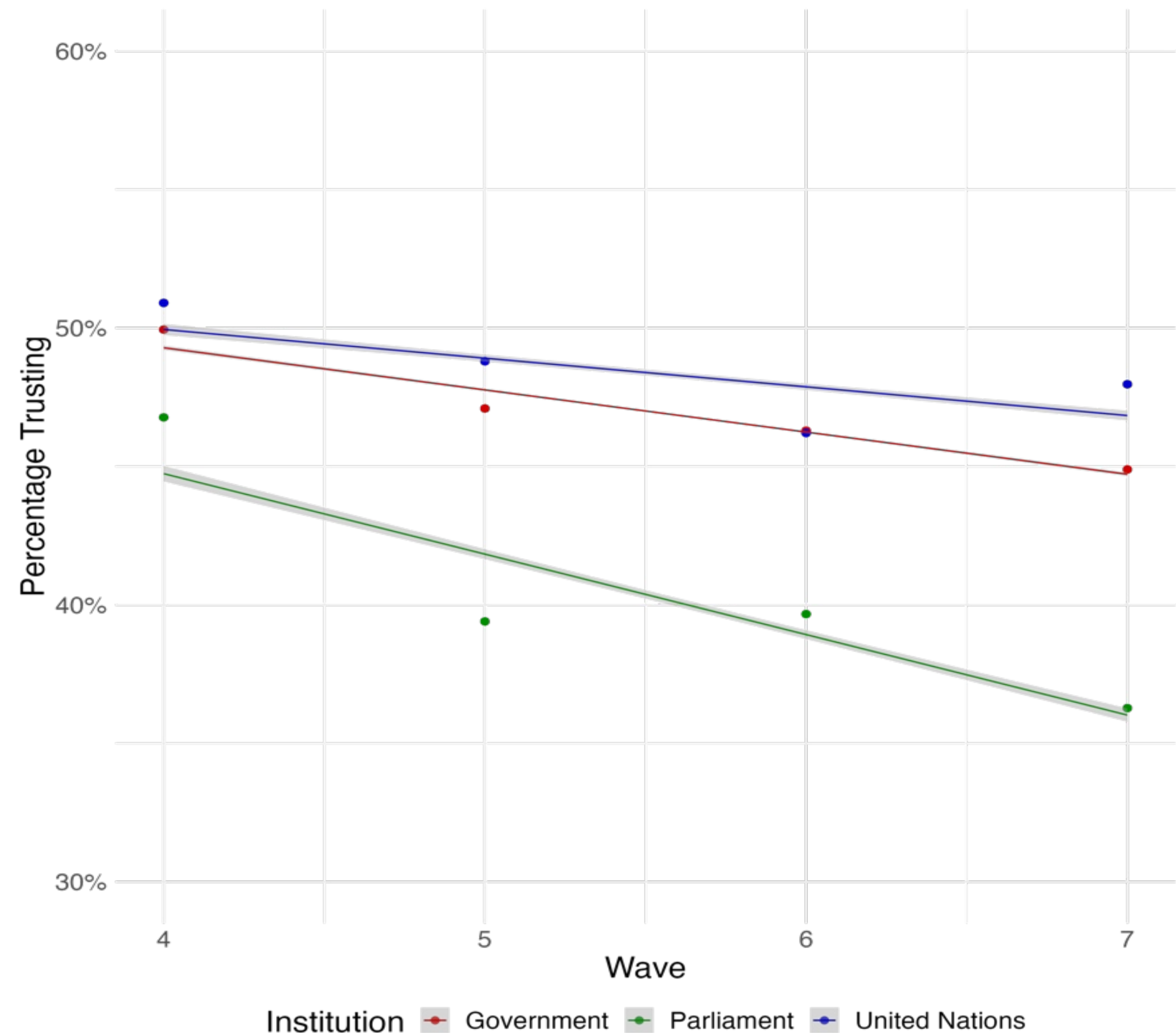
Dimensions of trust



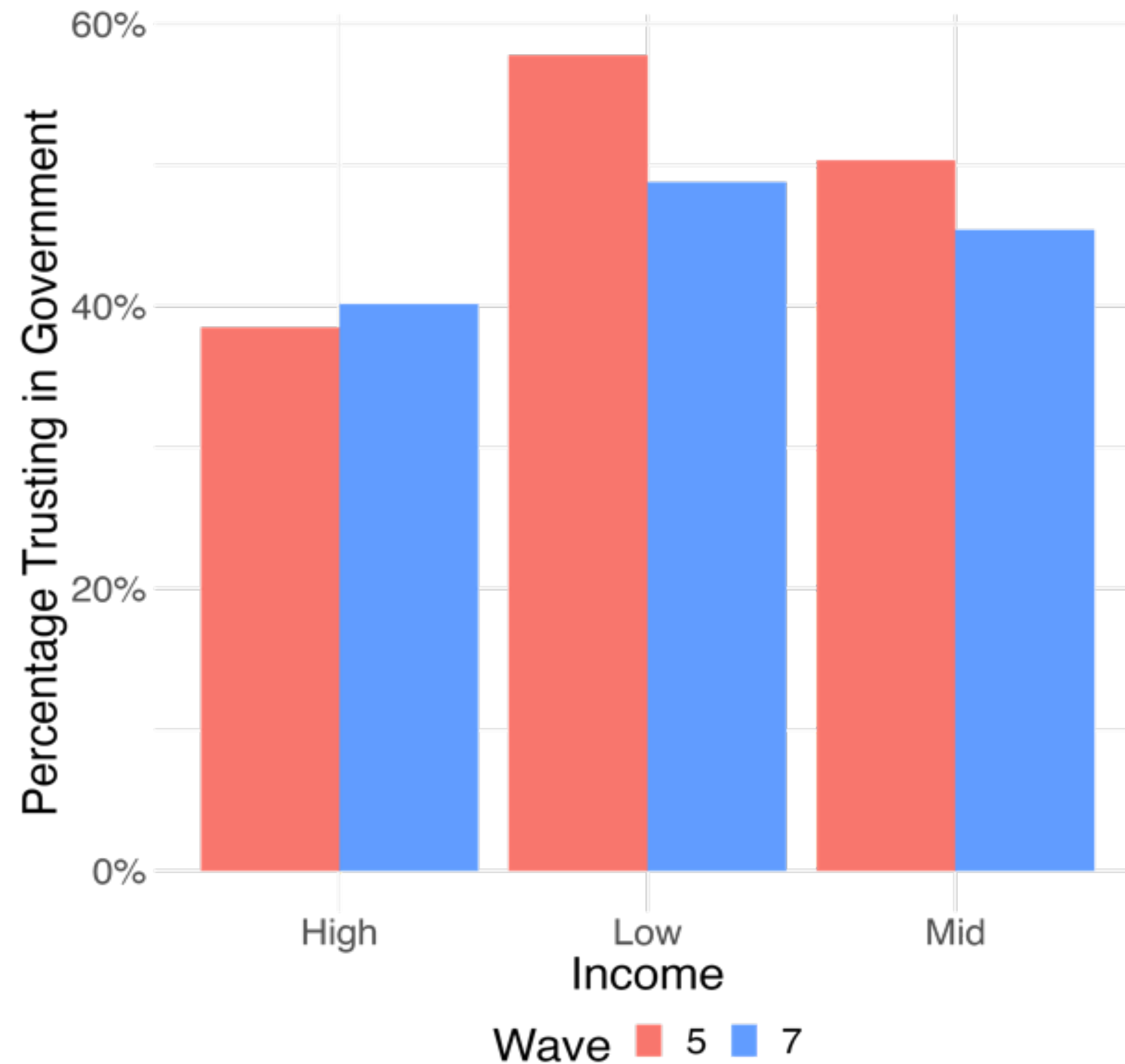
Both institutional and interpersonal trust are eroding – a signal of how deep the crisis has become

The 'trust crisis': global levels of trust, 1999-2022

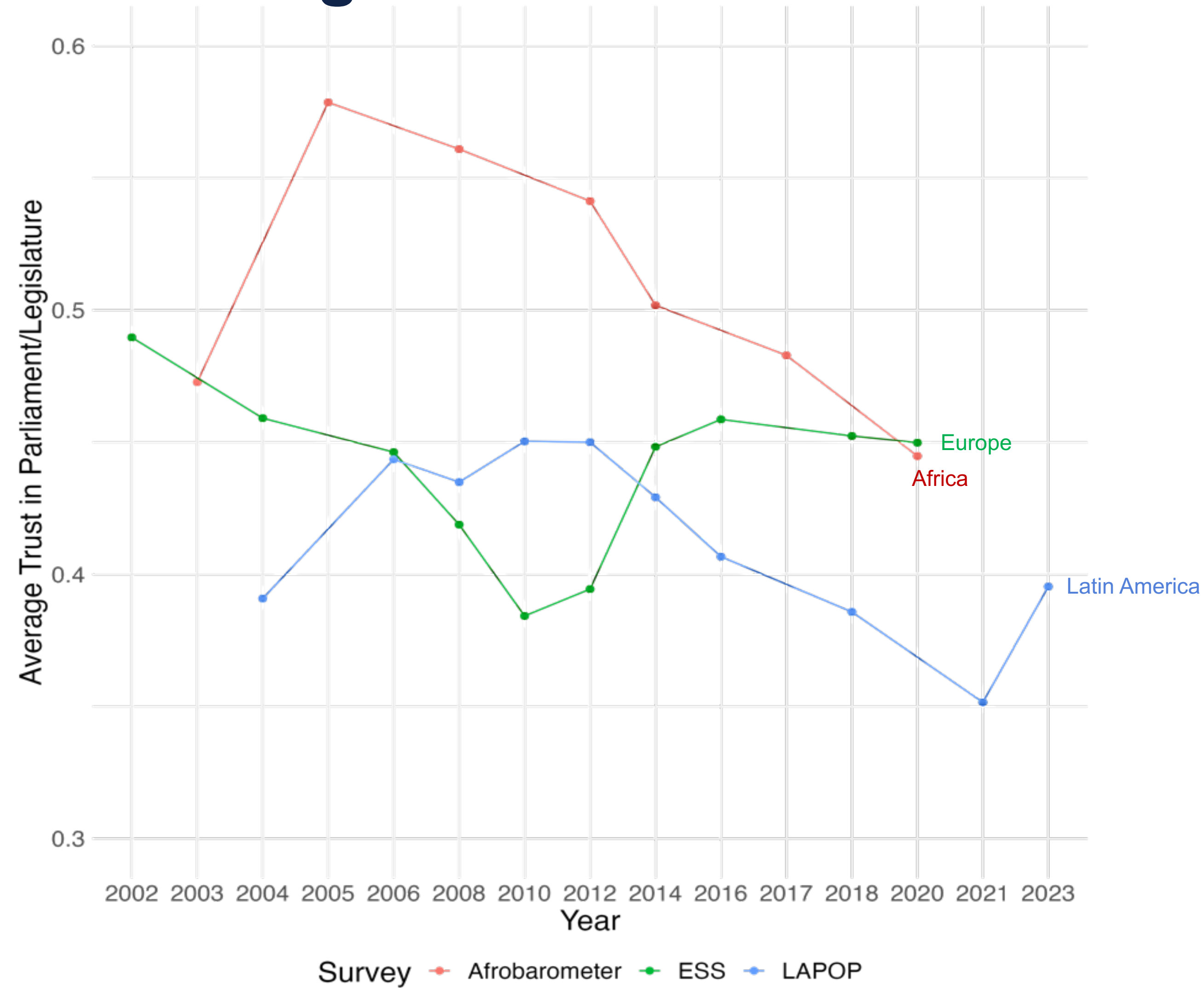
Over one-quarter of the global population has no trust in their government (16% in 2005)



Low-income countries are more trusting of their governments but show larger losses in trust over time...

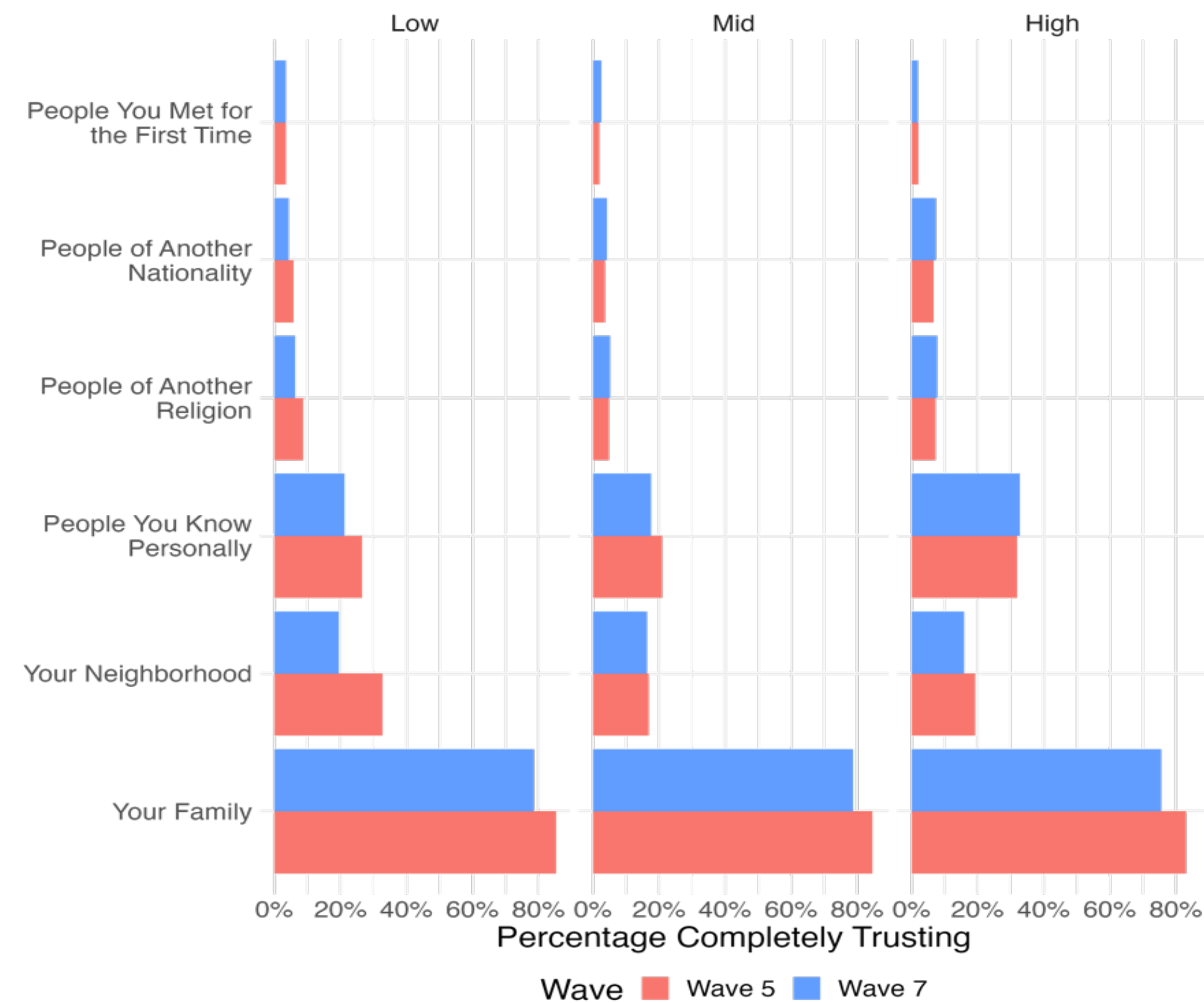


Regional average levels of institutional trust, 2002-2023



Stable global interpersonal trust since 2000 but we trust more those closer to us...

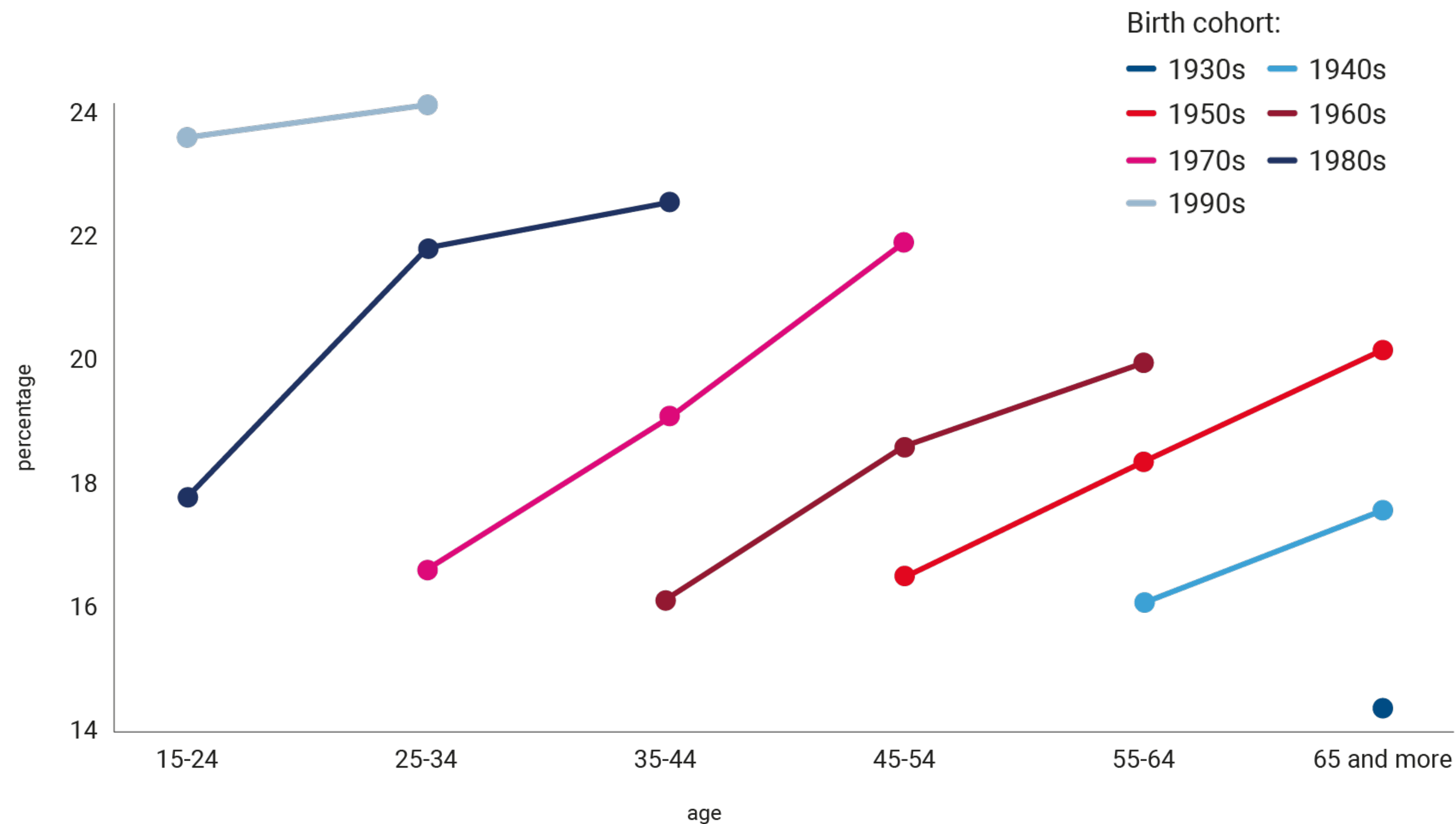
Changes in interpersonal trust between 2005–2009 and 2017–2022 in low-, mid- and high-income countries



Interpersonal trust is more resilient, but uneven

Globally, about **27% trusted others in 2005** vs **24% in 2022**

Widening generational gap in mistrust levels...



Source: World Values Survey, waves 4 (1999–2004), 5 (2005–2009), 6 (2010–2014) and 7 (2017–2022).

Younger generations increasingly lack trust in their government

Institutional distrust has risen fastest among those **born in the 1980s and 1990s**

Each new generation starts from a **lower baseline of trust** than the one before

Results similar for both institutional and interpersonal trust

The forces that build or erode trust



INEQUALITY

Gaps in income and opportunity erode solidarity and weaken trust



ECONOMIC SECURITY

Households one shock away from poverty are less likely to trust institutions or each other



GOVERNANCE

Transparent, fair, and accountable institutions build trust — corruption destroys it



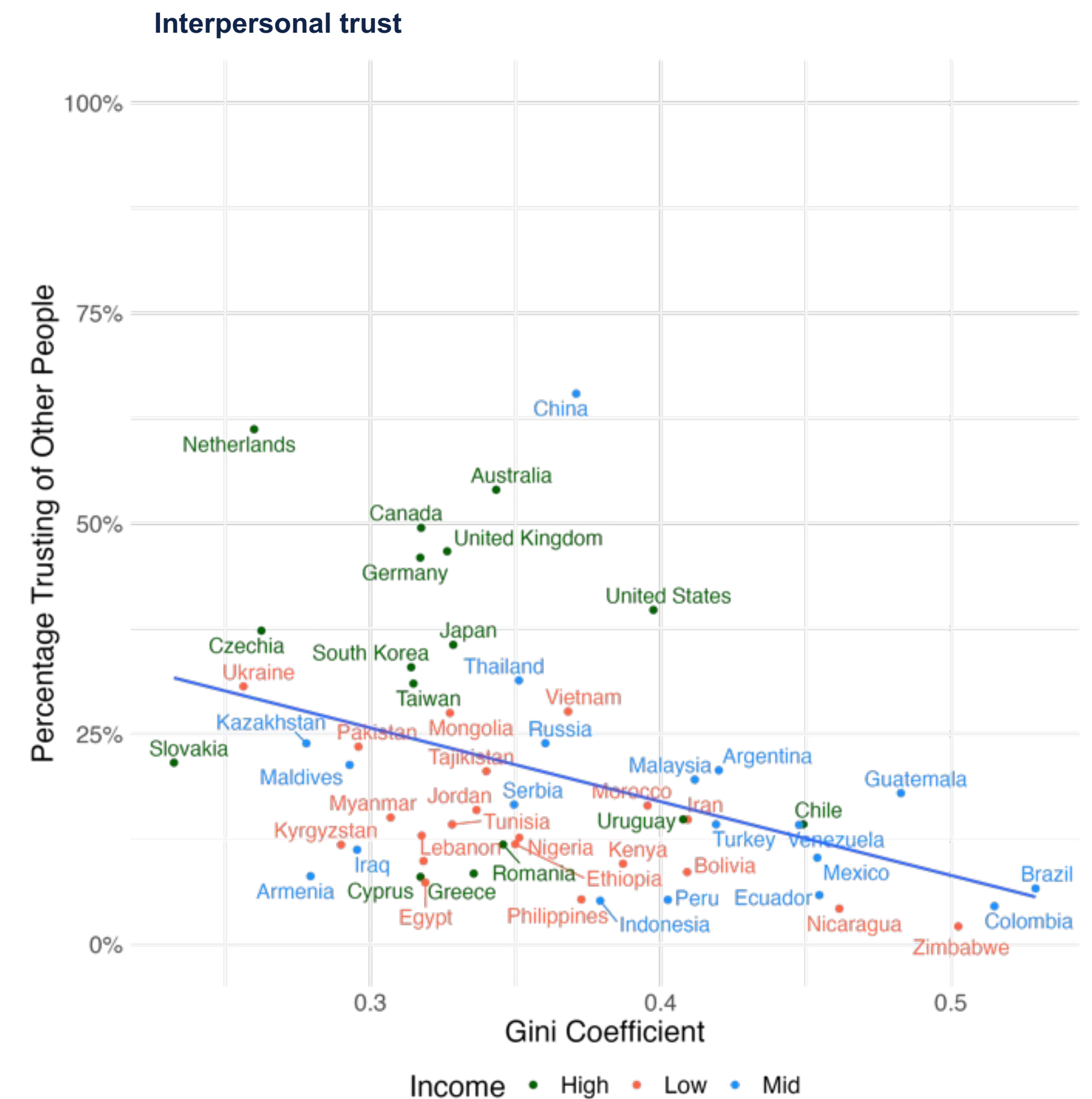
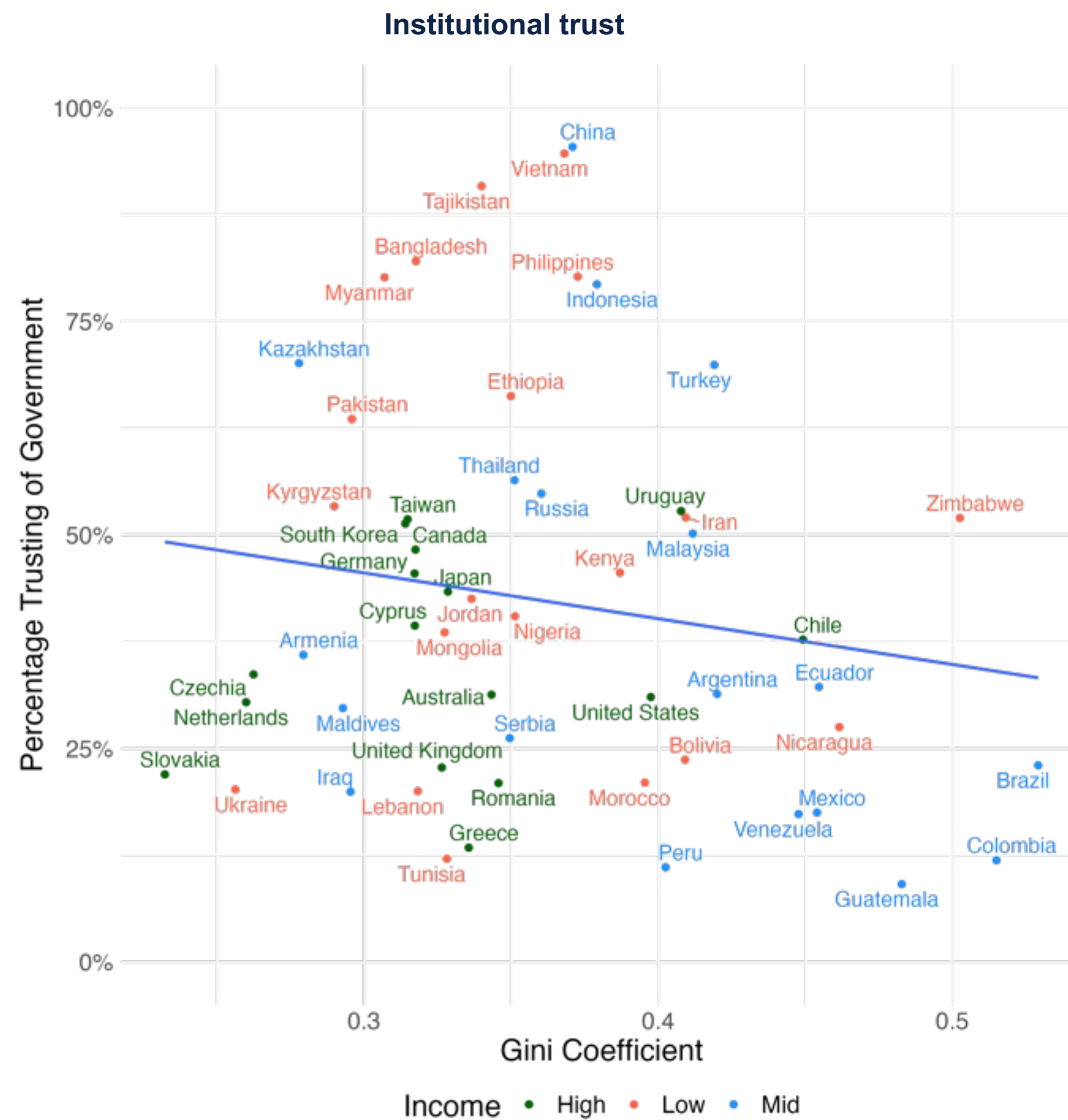
 **CRISES**
Financial shocks, pandemics, and conflicts test whether governments can deliver under pressure



FAIRNESS

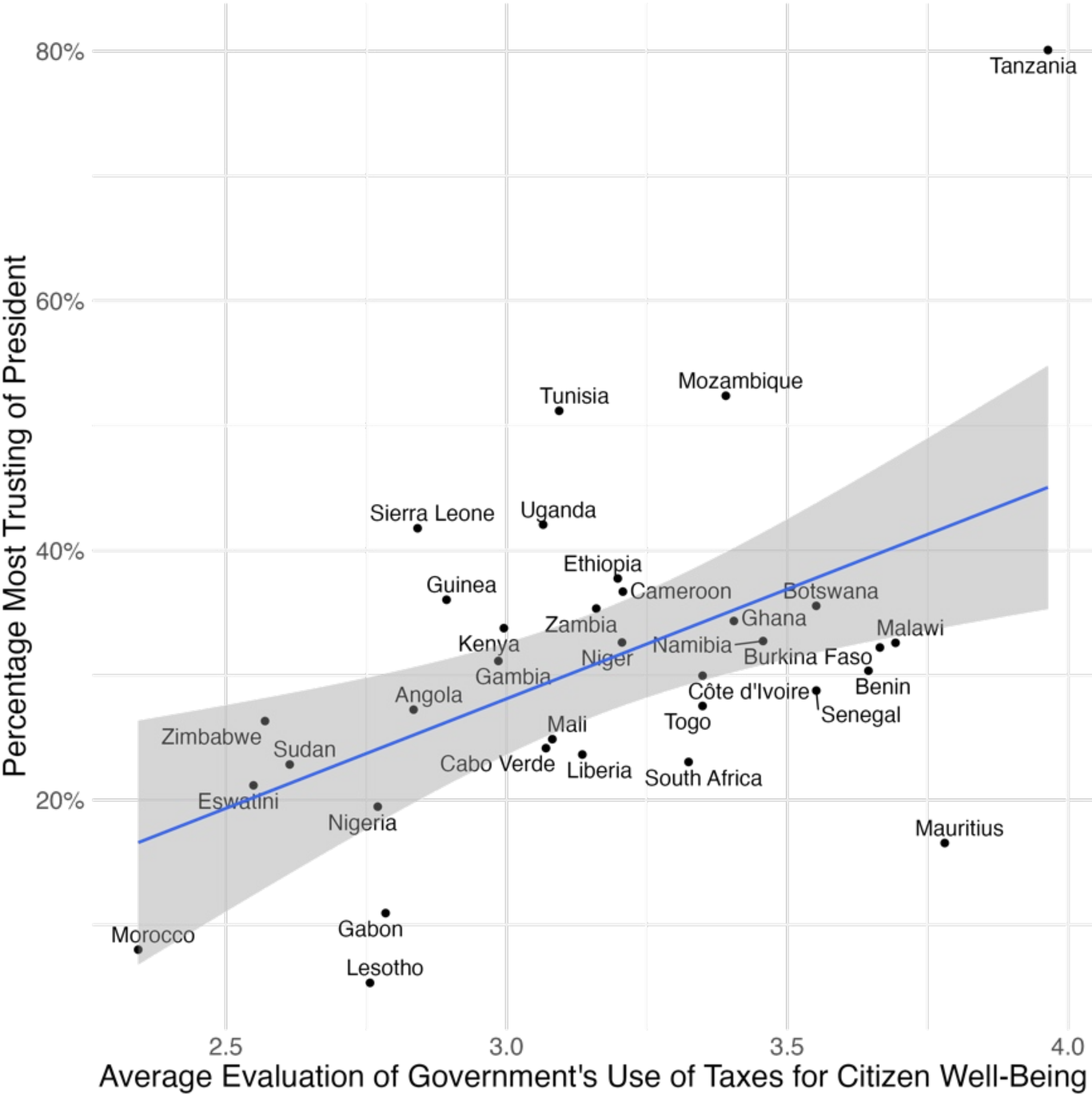
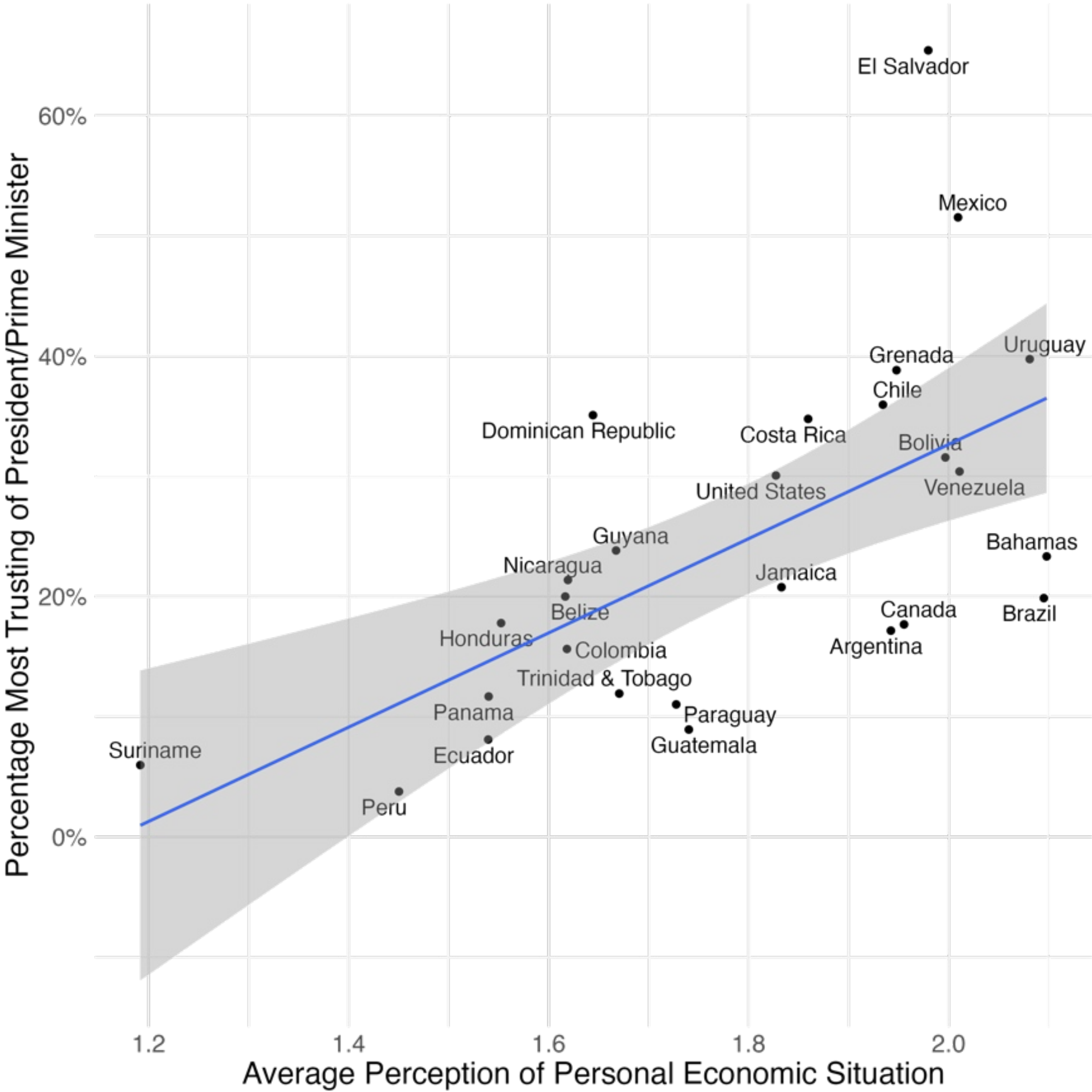
Perceptions of justice and equal treatment matter as much as actual outcomes

Trust and income inequality



Source: World Values Survey, wave 7 (2017–2022) and World Bank, PIP database, various years.

Trust responds not just to inequality directly but also how people perceive their economic situation and how governments address economic vulnerabilities...



Why declining trust matters



COHESION

Low trust weakens cooperation and deepens polarization



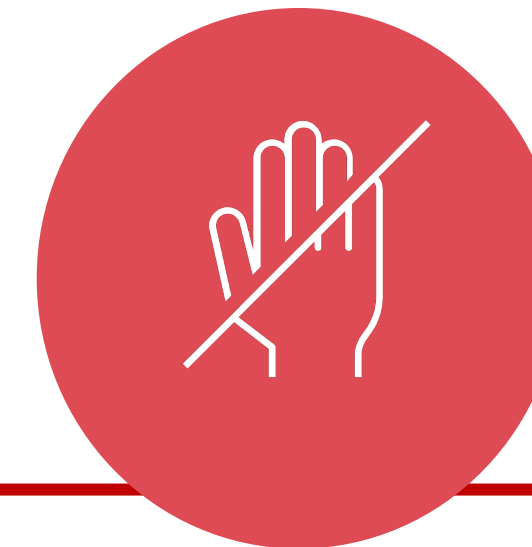
SOCIAL CONTRACT

Mistrust reduces tax compliance and civic duties



STABILITY

Distrust fuels protests, unrest, and may result in political violence



CORRUPTION

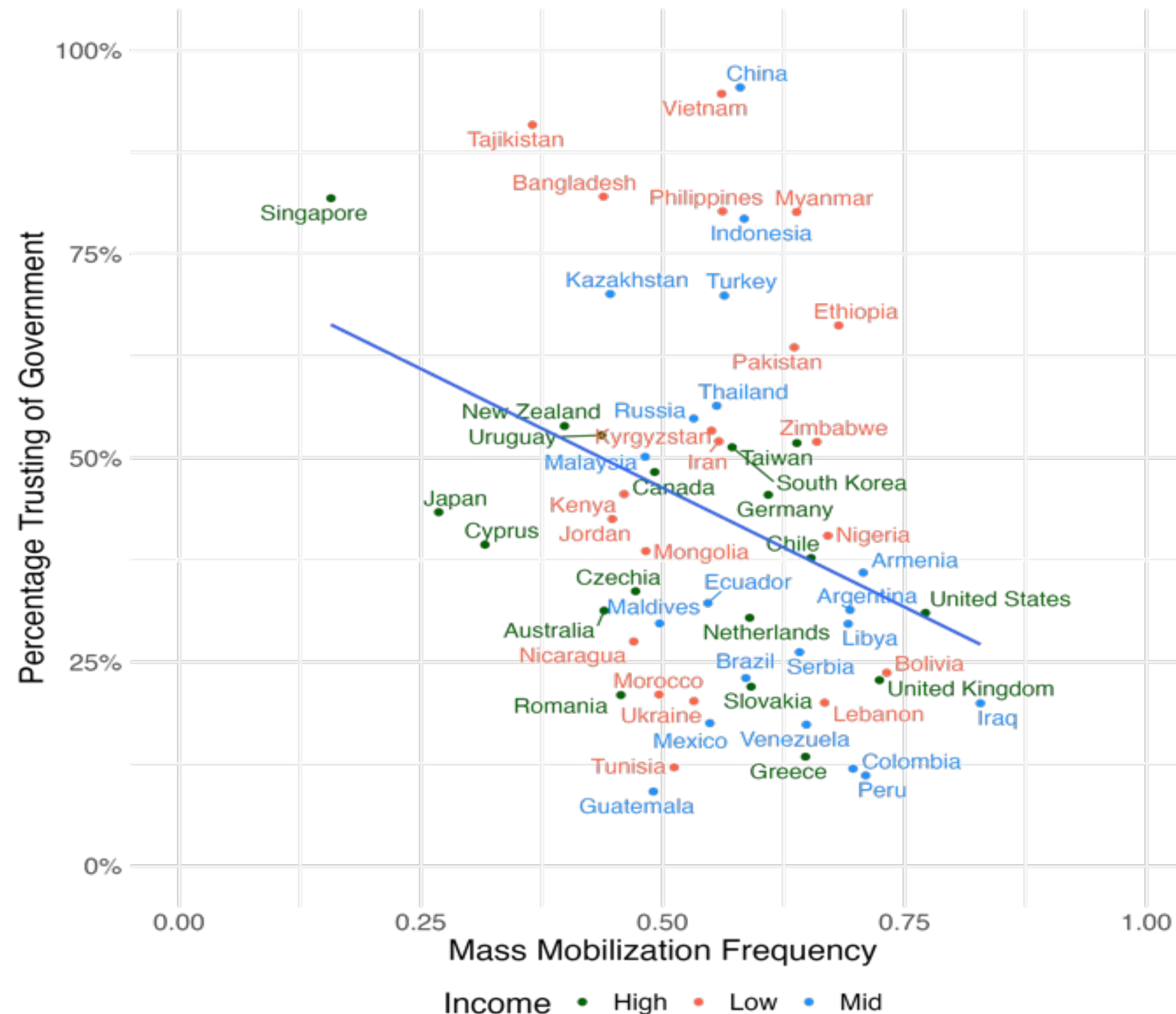
Lack of trust allows for corruption and corruption erodes trust – locking societies in a vicious cycle



DISINFORMATION

Mistrust creates the space for disinformation to spread; biased media and echo chambers amplify mistrust

Institutional mistrust increases mass mobilisation



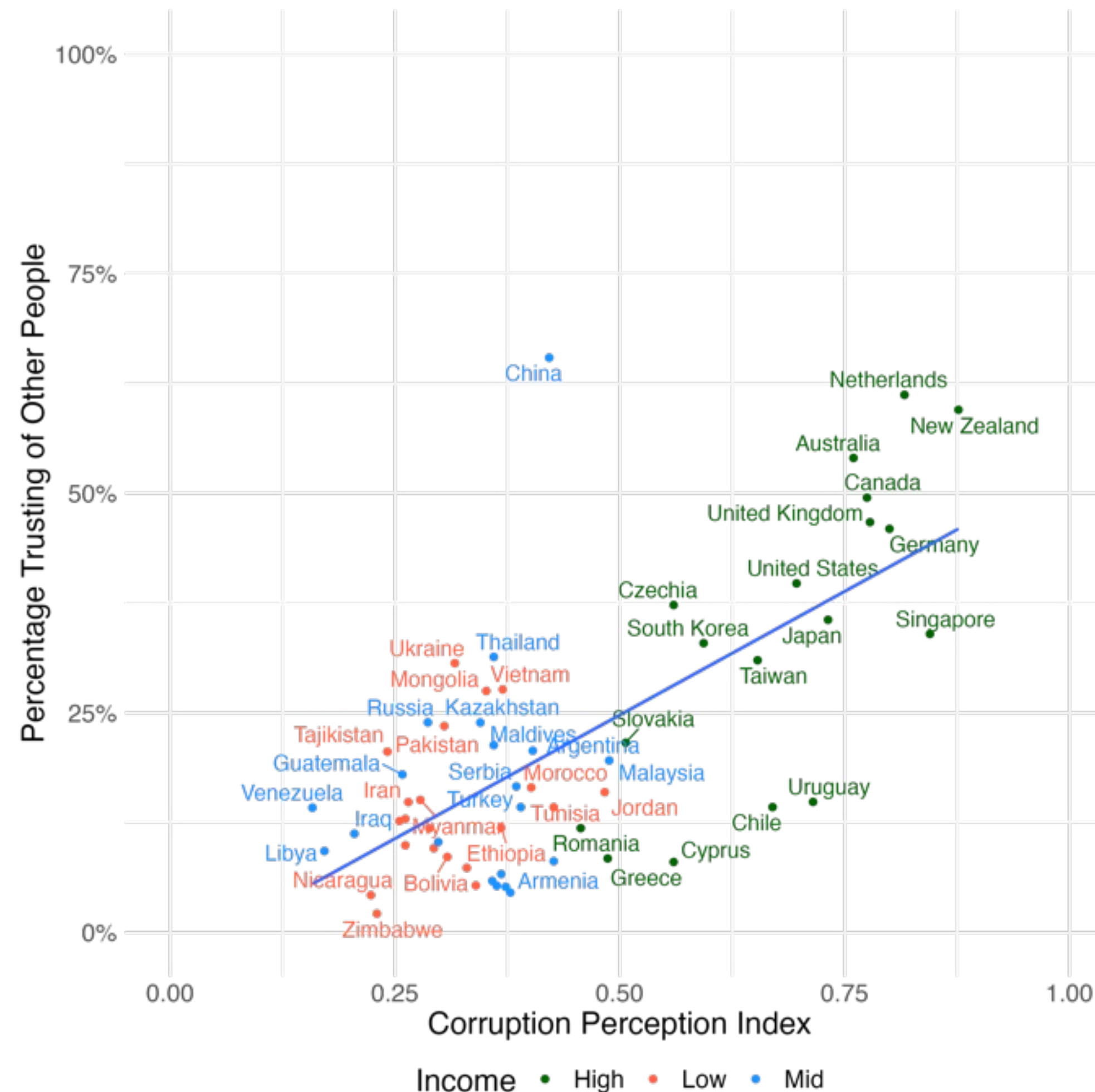
Lower levels of institutional trust associated with higher mass mobilisation

Trend driven by countries where institutional trust decreased since 2005

Results suggest reduction in institutional trust may have driven collective action around political demands

Weak but positive association between interpersonal trust levels and mass mobilisation

Trust and perceptions of corruption

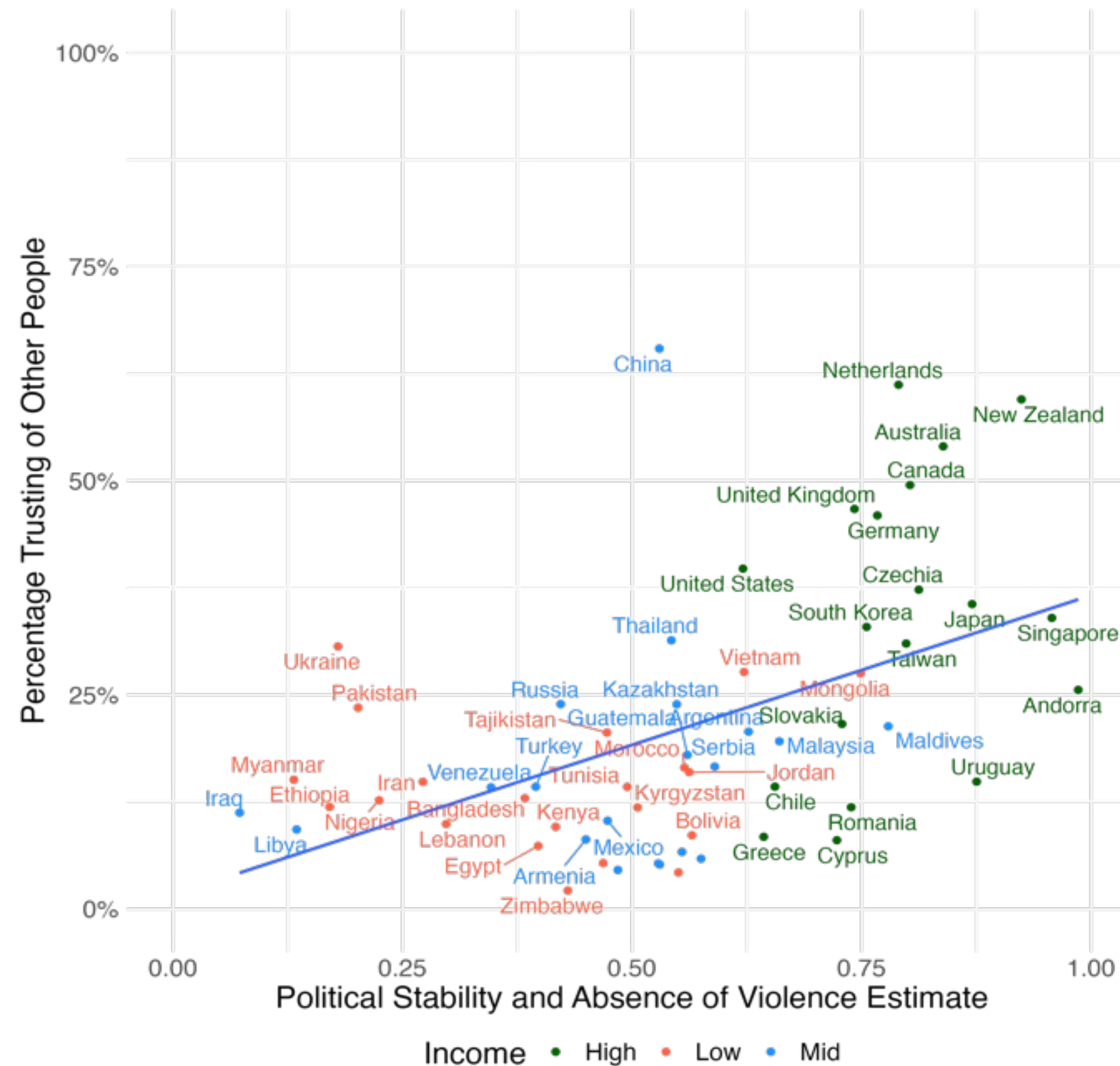


Countries with highest levels of interpersonal trust have the highest CPI (i.e. the lowest levels of perceived corruption)

Most of these are high-income countries (in green)

Weaker (but still positive) relationship between institutional trust and the CPI overall but strong in countries where institutional trust declined since 2005

Trust and political stability



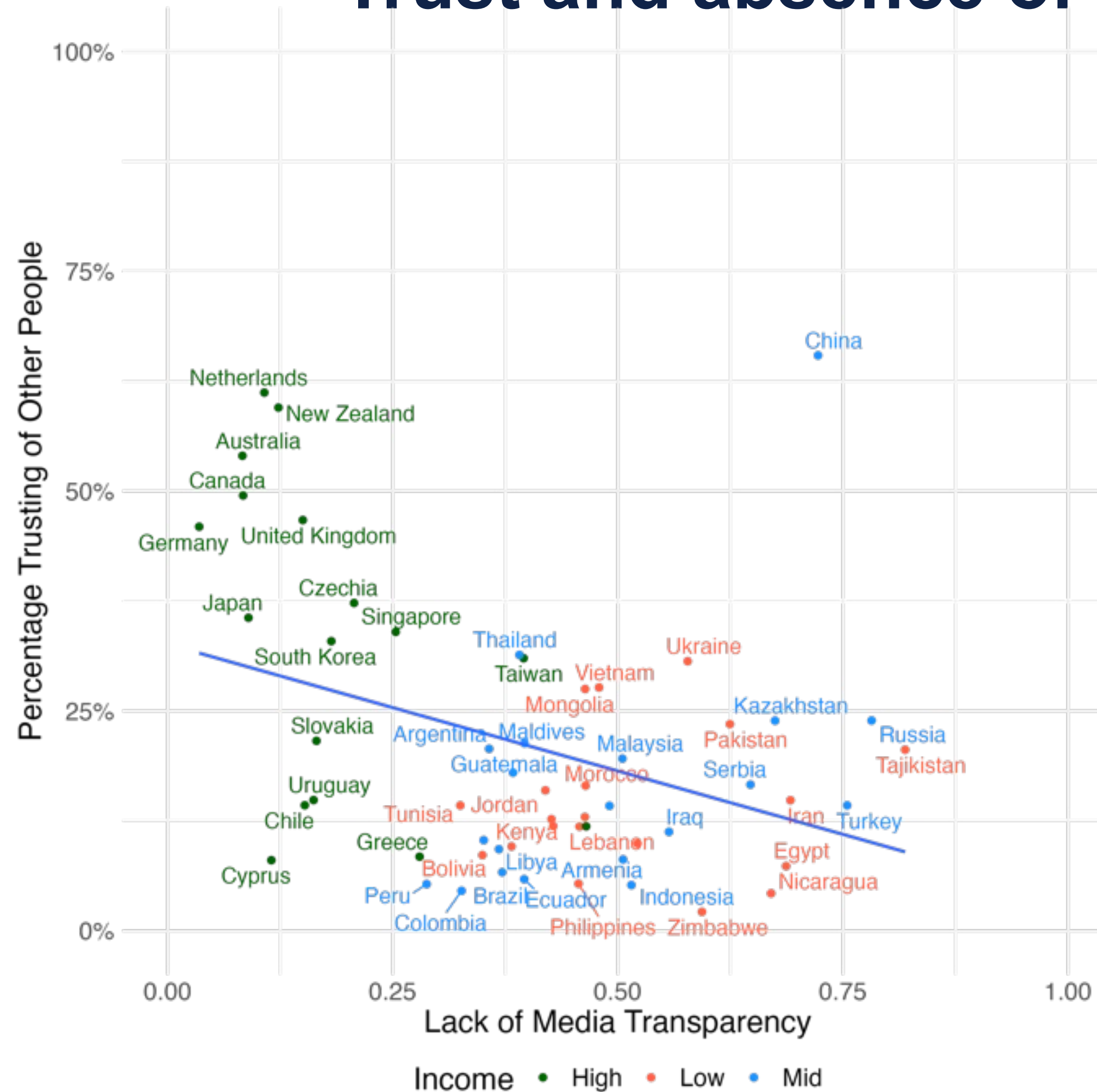
Trust is a foundation for peace and conflict prevention

When trust erodes, instability and conflict risks rise

Relationship stronger for interpersonal trust; weaker for institutional trust

Clear income divide in relationship between socio-political stability and both interpersonal and institutional trust

Trust and absence of media transparency



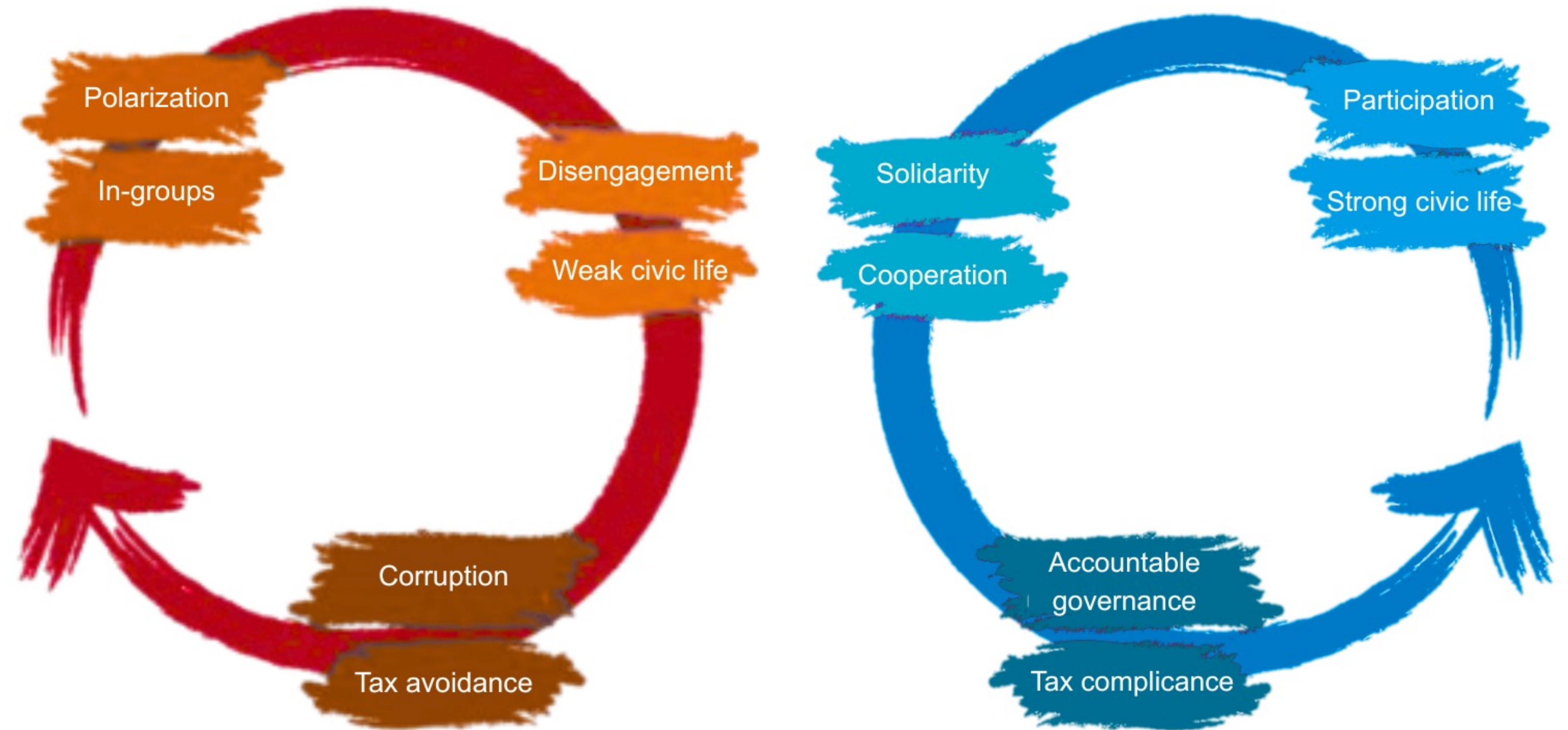
Overall, higher levels of media freedom, transparency (in figure) and independence in countries with high levels of interpersonal trust

Opposite relationship for institutional trust but result driven by countries where media is highly controlled

Clear income divide in relationship between media freedom and trust

Trust is not static

Trust creates virtuous cycles — distrust fuels downward spirals

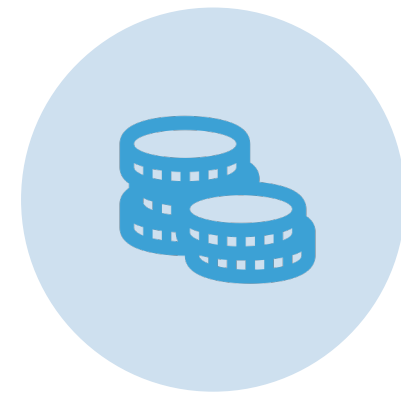


Rebuilding trust?



STRONGER INSTITUTIONS

Fair, competent, and accountable governance builds trust.



EQUITY & REDISTRIBUTION

Reducing inequality and insecurity strengthens confidence.



CIVIL SOCIETY & MEDIA

Pluralism and accountability connect citizens and institutions.



GLOBAL COOPERATION

Shared solutions for cross-border crises rebuild trust worldwide.

***Trust is more than
a cultural trait: it
can be built, or
broken, by policy
choices***

Thank you!

Download the full working paper here:

