

The Underlying Structure of Political Support

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Abstract

Contemporary politics is marked by concerns about declining citizen satisfaction with democracy, falling political trust, and weakening democratic support. Scholars in this field often rely on the concept of political support but use its indicators interchangeably or inconsistently. Meanwhile, despite its relevance for democratic resilience, studies on its underlying structure remain scarce. Drawing on the foundational work of Easton and Norris, we derive expectations about the dimensionality of political support and the interplay among its various indicators. We test these expectations using factor analysis, item response theory models, random intercept cross-lagged panel models, and first-difference models applied to 29 waves of the German Longitudinal Election Study panel. As expected, specific support fluctuates substantially, whereas diffuse support is more stable, even though recent data show small declines in multiple indicators. Our results indicate that political support indicators form a one-dimensional latent trait. Along this trait, specific evaluations, like satisfaction with the government, differentiate respondents at higher levels of support, whereas more diffuse attitudes, such as institutional trust, best distinguish between those with below-average support. Longitudinal analyses reveal no evidence that changes in specific support systematically precede changes in diffuse support. Instead, changes in any indicator tend to predict subsequent changes in others, indicating self-reinforcing dynamics. Finally, first-difference models offer limited support for a buffering “reservoir of goodwill.” Prior levels of specific support neither amplify nor mitigate the effects of subsequent changes on more diffuse indicators. Beyond structural insights, our item response theory results provide important practical guidance for researchers when deciding between political support indicators.

Keywords

democratic backsliding; political culture; political support; satisfaction with democracy

1. Introduction

Contemporary politics is marked by concerns about declining citizen satisfaction with democracy, falling levels of political trust, and weakening democratic support across advanced democracies. While some authors argue that these concerns are overstated (e.g., Devine & Valgarðsson, 2024), others point towards an emerging “crisis of democracy” (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018): Citizens are dissatisfied with democracies and governments (Foa & Mounk, 2016), trust in representative democratic institutions is in decline (Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Valgarðsson et al., 2025), and researchers observe indications of democratic backsliding across the world (Mechkova et al., 2017; Nord et al., 2025).

The motivation to trace or discuss these various measures is normally informed by the broader conceptual framework of political support. Scholars perceive political support as an important foundation of system stability and democratic resilience (Almond & Verba, 1963; Claassen, 2020a; Dalton, 2006; Ginsburg & Huq, 2018; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Conversely, declines in indicators of political support could signal threats to the stability of democratic regimes. As Norris (2011, p. 37) argues, declining political support can foster protest politics and, in the long run, undermine regime stability.

Despite its widespread use and references to common, foundational literature, “political support” often remains ambiguously defined and operationalized. Most of the existing literature is either interested in predictors of one of the many political support indicators (e.g., Daoust & Nadeau, 2021; Erhardt, 2023; Loveless & Binelli, 2020; Magalhães, 2014; Quaranta & Martini, 2016) or investigates how one indicator affects another (e.g., Christmann & Torcal, 2017; Ouattara & van der Meer, 2023; Zymová, 2024). Nevertheless, there have been efforts to derive better measurements of specific components of political support (Claassen et al., 2025) and to better understand the dimensionality and meaning of political support indicators (Hu et al., 2025; Linde & Ekman, 2003; van der Meer & Ouattara, 2019).

In this article, we aim to advance these latter efforts and to improve our limited understanding of the underlying structure of political support. Building on the foundational work of Easton (1957, 1975) and Norris (1999, 2011), scholars commonly distinguish between volatile, specific forms of support and more inert, diffuse forms. Easton conceptualized political support at two qualitatively distinct levels. First, specific support directed toward incumbents and outputs. Second, diffuse support rooted in support for regime norms and principles. Norris suggests that political support is better understood as a continuum, with attitudes ranging from concrete evaluations of officeholders to deep-seated beliefs about democratic legitimacy and national identity. In both conceptualizations, specific support is thought to be more susceptible to short-term deterioration. But, due to a deeper “reservoir of goodwill” (Easton, 1965; Mauk, 2020), these short-term fluctuations in specific support should not translate directly into declines in more foundational diffuse support.

Based on this literature, we formulate four observable implications about the structure of political support: First, according to Easton, political support indicators should load on two dimensions, but according to Norris, they all represent a single latent dimension. Second, assuming one latent dimension, Norris’s conceptualization implies an inherent ordering ranging from specific to diffuse indicators. For example, asking about evaluations of the government should capture differences between respondents towards the specific end and differentiate better between people with relatively high political support levels, while items

asking about one's openness to replacing democracy with a dictatorship should differentiate best between citizens with low levels of political support. Third, the varying degrees of volatility of specific and diffuse levels of political support imply a directional temporal dynamic. Specifically, changes in specific political support should precede changes in more diffuse support levels. Fourth, changes in specific support should trigger greater changes in diffuse support if an individual's "reservoir of goodwill" is already depleted by prior dissatisfaction.

We probe these implications employing a combination of factor analysis, item response theory (IRT) modelling, random intercept cross-lagged panel models (RI-CLPMs), and first difference models using data from 29 waves of the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) panel spanning eight years and eight measures theoretically related to political support. In line with the argumentation by Norris (2011), we find that these indicators are best represented by a single latent dimension and are largely ordered as expected: More specific indicators like satisfaction with the government and chancellor distinguish best among citizens with medium to high support levels, while institutional trust and democratic satisfaction are somewhat more informative at below-average levels.

These results provide practical guidance for researchers: Detecting variation at very low levels of political support remains difficult because commonly used diffuse items offer little discriminative information. Simplifying response scales might alleviate this issue, but these items might also be affected by social desirability (Bischof et al., 2023; Kaftan, 2024). Apart from that, trust in government distinguishes citizens more effectively than parliamentary trust and democratic satisfaction. Finally, if researchers need to efficiently capture broad coverage across the political support continuum, they should combine an item that differentiates better at low levels (i.e., trust items) with one that discriminates well at medium to high levels (i.e., governmental satisfaction).

In our temporal analyses, contrary to expectations, the RI-CLPMs do not show a temporal ordering. For virtually all indicator pairs, changes in one component trigger subsequent changes in the other in the same direction. This suggests that support components do not deviate in an ordered cascade. Instead, declines (but also reinvigoration) of support at any point along the specific–diffuse continuum could encourage a reinforcing dynamic. Similarly, the evidence for a "reservoir of goodwill" is rather weak. Low levels of prior specific support only modestly moderate the effect of short-term changes, and only for a few outcomes.

Besides the practical advice derived above, this article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the concept of political support. This can help inform both designing and interpreting survey research within this prominent area of political science. Our results depict political support as a largely one-dimensional construct with substantial empirical interdependence across its components. Fluctuations tend to reverberate broadly across the attitudinal structure rather than progressing in an ordered sequence from specific to diffuse levels. This is consistent with the reciprocal effects previously documented between two support levels (e.g., Claassen & Magalhães, 2022) and the evidence that indicators of political support, such as democratic support, satisfaction with democracy, and political trust, are complex and multidimensional concepts (Hu et al., 2025; Linde & Ekman, 2003; van der Meer & Ouattara, 2019).

2. Conceptualizations and Empirical Evidence

The concept of political support has long been a cornerstone in the study of political culture and regime stability. The contemporary interest in political support is nurtured by the belief that shared democratic values are necessary “guardrails of democracy” (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). As Ginsburg and Huq (2018, p. 245) note, democratic governance requires a meaningful level of public commitment to the system. That is why recent indications of backsliding in some areas of political support (Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Foa & Mounk, 2016; Nord et al., 2025) sparked renewed scholarly interest.

Based on the seminal contributions of Easton (1957, 1965, 1975), most of these studies build on the distinction between specific and diffuse political support. Specific support refers to (performance) evaluations of specific situations, policies, or political leaders. It can thus fluctuate with electoral cycles, leadership changes, immediate policy outputs, or political events. In contrast, diffuse support reflects the principled support for a political regime, its institutions, and foundational principles. This support is considered more durable, as a “reservoir of goodwill” (Easton, 1965) within citizens protects it from being immediately affected by specific dissatisfaction. Thus, we can reasonably assume that citizens will continue to support democratic principles even though they might be discontent with a new government and its policies.

Building on Easton, Norris (1999, 2011) proposed a refined conceptualization that conceives of political support as an interconnected and hierarchical continuum instead of two distinct types (Figure 1). This latent dimension ranges from very specific, such as approval of officeholders, through evaluations of regime performance, to very diffuse, such as feelings of a national identity.

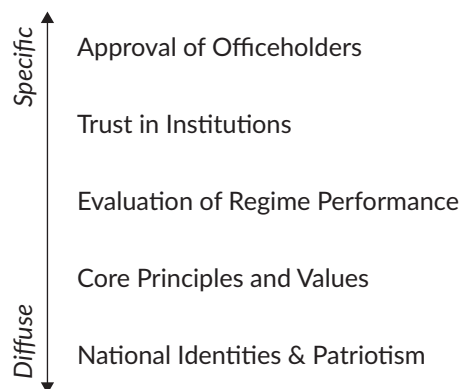


Figure 1. Political support after Norris (2011).

Easton’s and Norris’s work provides the foundation for much of the literature on political support. When examining rather specific levels of political support as the outcome, researchers have explored a wide range of predictors. They find, for example, that party identification with anti-system parties negatively affects trust in democratic institutions (Arzheimer, 2025), while satisfaction with government policies fosters higher levels of political trust (de Blok, 2024; de Blok et al., 2022), and better ideological representation in government is associated with higher satisfaction with democracy (Erhardt, 2023; Mayne & Hakhverdian, 2017). Generally, in this strand of research, satisfaction with democracy, an evaluation of regime performance, receives the most scholarly attention (see Singh & Mayne, 2023, for a recent overview). Most prominently, there is ample

evidence that both subjective economic evaluations (Cordero & Simón, 2016; Daoust & Nadeau, 2021; Loveless & Binelli, 2020; Nadeau et al., 2019, 2020) and objective economic performance (Claassen & Magalhães, 2022; Quaranta & Martini, 2016) shape citizens' democratic satisfaction. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that indicators towards the specific end of political support are indeed susceptible to many different fluctuations in citizens' political and personal circumstances.

When investigating more diffuse political support, researchers often follow the implied ordering by Norris (2011) and use more specific indicators as predictors. For example, Zymová (2024) finds that lower satisfaction with democracy is associated with lower democratic support. Similarly, Ouattara and van der Meer (2023) provide evidence that low and declining political trust lowers support for representative democracy (but raises it for direct democracy). Examining the effect of objective indicators of government effectiveness, Magalhães (2014) shows that higher effectiveness is associated with higher democratic support, whereas Claassen and Magalhães (2022) find only an indirect positive effect of government effectiveness in the area of crime prevention, mediated by increased democratic satisfaction. Thus, while diffuse levels of democratic support should be more inert to everyday politics, they can indeed be affected to some extent by changes in more specific support levels.

While the literature on causes of, and changes in, political support has been blossoming, the structure of its fundamental concept has received less attention, leading to ambiguous operationalizations that are inconsistent across studies. Few scholars have undertaken the task to dissect the meaning of indicators like satisfaction with democracy (Linde & Ekman, 2003), institutional trust (van der Meer & Ouattara, 2019), or democratic support (Hu et al., 2025) in greater detail, while others attempt to improve the measurement of components of democratic support (e.g., Claassen et al., 2025). In addition, prominent recent literature (Claassen, 2020a, 2020b) is based on synthesizing data from multiple surveys and items into a single latent measure of political support across time and countries. This approach has, in turn, been criticized, for example by Hu et al. (2025), for lacking validation and capturing only very abstract democratic support.

3. Theoretical Implications

With this study, we want to add to this smaller, less-developed strand of literature that investigates the underlying structure of political support and the relationships between its various indicators. Specifically, we derive four testable implications about political support structure from the foundational work of Easton (1957, 1965, 1975) and Norris (1999, 2011). We distinguish between descriptive and inferential expectations. The descriptive expectations refer to the dimensionality of political support (Section 3.1) and the ordering of indicators along these dimensions (Section 3.2), whereas the inferential expectations concern temporal dynamics, that is, the temporal direction of changes between different indicators (Section 3.3) and the relevance of individuals' reservoir of goodwill (Section 3.4).

3.1. Dimensionality

First, the foundational literature provides two main competing expectations about the dimensionality of political support. According to Easton, specific and diffuse support are two distinct concepts. While specific support reflects evaluations susceptible to short-term fluctuations, diffuse support reflects deeper regime attachment. This clearly represents a two-dimensional structure of political support. In contrast, Norris

proposed a conceptualization of political support on a hierarchical continuum ranging from very specific support levels such as the evaluation of single politicians to more diffuse levels of political support including feelings of patriotism or national pride (Figure 1). This view clearly suggests a unidimensional structure of political support: All political support indicators should load on a single latent factor.

3.2. Ordering

Second, if political support is unidimensional, we would expect the indicators to be ordered along this underlying dimension by their specificity. In theory, specific indicators should differentiate best between individuals with high political support levels, because when support is high, individual satisfaction with presidents or ministers can vary, but commitment to democratic principles remains widespread. In contrast, indicators tapping very generalized, diffuse regime support should only differentiate between those with low levels of political support, because citizens should question regime principles when support erodes substantially. Practically, we thus expect items to align on the latent dimension as presented in Figure 1.

3.3. Directionality

Third, classical theory posits an asymmetric temporal direction between different levels of political support: Specific support is seen as volatile, whereas diffuse support is inert, buffered by an individual's reservoir of goodwill. As Figure 2 illustrates, changes in specific support should precede changes in diffuse support. In this adaptation of Easton's reservoir analogy to Norris's unidimensional conceptualization, positive specific evaluations are expected to refill the whole reservoir, while negative evaluations drain it. In both cases, water levels in the highest basin will be the first to be affected. In contrast, more recent accounts of political support (e.g., Claassen & Magalhães, 2022) also point towards weak reciprocal dynamics. Therefore, the interplay between specific and diffuse political support may also be mutually reinforcing.

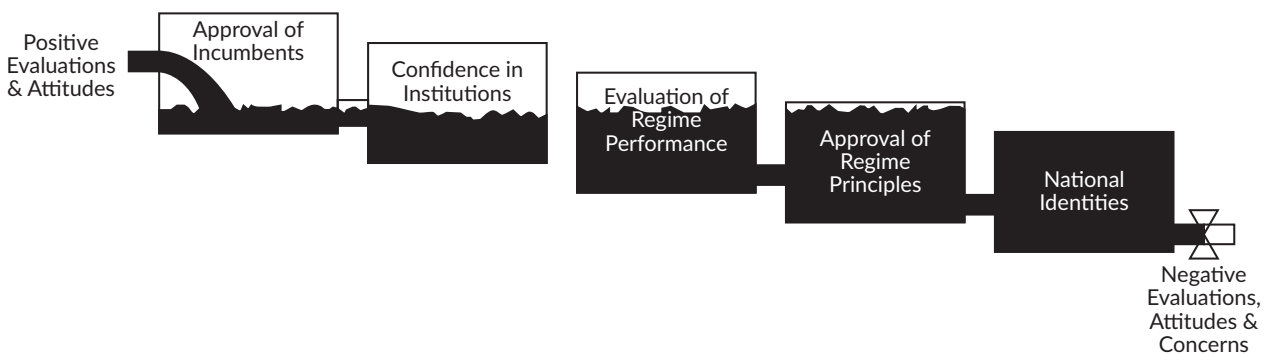


Figure 2. Cascading reservoirs of goodwill.

3.4. Reservoir of Goodwill

Fourth, following the reservoir metaphor illustrated in Figure 2, we further expect citizens with accumulated positive experiences to exhibit more resilience. That is, the diffuse political support of citizens with high prior specific support levels should be less affected by declines in specific support. Conversely, prolonged periods of dissatisfaction should make subsequent changes in specific support more impactful as citizens with depleted

reservoirs lack this buffer. This follows the arguments that reservoirs of goodwill can shield more diffuse political support from the frequent fluctuations in specific support (Easton, 1965). For example, citizens stay committed to democratic norms when losing an election even when affective polarization is high (Tomic et al., 2026). However, prolonged dissatisfaction might still hurt diffuse support (Mauk, 2020).

Therefore, this resembles a moderation effect. A decline in a specific support indicator should be more strongly related to declines in diffuse support if an individual's reservoir has already drained, that is, if the individual already exhibited lower specific support for a prolonged period of time.

4. Research Design

4.1. Data and Case

To investigate all four expectations in a unified framework, our analysis leverages panel data from the GLES. The GLES is a uniquely suited data source. For one, it includes frequent measurements of multiple established indicators of political support. This ranges from very specific support such as individuals' satisfaction with the chancellor to more diffuse political support indicators such as opposition to democratic alternatives. This variety of indicators provides a strong basis for testing the theoretical expectations about dimensionality and ordering. Crucially, it further provides us with repeated observations of the same individuals stretching 29 unequally spaced waves covering a time period of eight years (October 2016 to October 2024, see Table A1). This panel structure is essential for testing the derived theoretical implications with a temporal component.

As we focus on the single case of Germany, any generalizations need to carefully consider national contexts. On one side, Germany exemplifies the situation of many Western European states: a consolidated democracy with generally strong political support that shows some warning signs of substantial discontent with the political system in recent years. Identification with major parties is declining, and the radical right Alternative for Germany (AfD) is on the rise. Further, while still being comparatively satisfied, Germans recorded their lowest average satisfaction with democracy since 2010 in the 2023 European Social Survey (ESS ERIC, 2025a). On the other side, Germany has a unique historical legacy, experiencing two very distinct flavors of authoritarian rule within the last 100 years. Future research collecting and analyzing panel data in other countries could therefore extend our findings in valuable ways. For now, we limit our comparative ambitions to probing the dimensionality of political support (Section 3.1) by analyzing the factor structure of comparable survey items across countries using the 10th round of the European Social Survey (ESS ERIC, 2023, 2025b) which was fielded in 2020.

4.2. Variables

In the GLES data, we identified eight variables that are captured often enough to allow an analysis and arguably represent measurements of political support at different levels of specificity and diffuseness: Satisfaction With Chancellor, Satisfaction With Government, Trust in Government, Trust in Parliament, Satisfaction With Democracy, Opposition to Dictatorship, Opposition to Expertocracy, and Identification With Germany. Assuming Norris's hierarchical continuum of political support (see also Figure 1), we situate the items asking for the satisfaction with the chancellor and government at the most specific end of this continuum. It clearly reflects citizens' current approval of officeholders. Trust in government and trust in

parliament relate most closely to the level of trust and confidence in regime institutions. We treat satisfaction with democracy as an evaluation of regime performance, as typically operationalized in the literature, corresponding to the middle level of political support in Norris's conceptualization. Citizens' opposition to dictatorship and their opposition to expertocracy are used to measure their more diffuse democratic principles and values. Finally, identification with Germany represents the most diffuse item in our analysis, as it taps into national identities. It is important to note that this item might be especially sensitive in Germany compared to other countries due to its historical legacy and experiences with both national socialism and the German Democratic Republic.

As Figure A1 illustrates, not all items are included in each wave. For our analyses, we only keep observations if a respondent has recorded at least two out of these indicators within one wave. This results in a data set containing 338,524 observations clustered in 34,094 respondents. Table A2 gives an overview of the original scales and question wordings of the eight main indicators used for most of our analyses. In short, satisfaction with the chancellor and the government is originally captured on 11-point scales while all other indicators are measured through five-step Likert items. Table A3 presents applied recodings. We generally treat all variables as continuous and code them to make higher values indicate more political support.

4.3. Modelling Approach

To investigate the underlying structure of political support and the interplay of different support indicators, we leverage a number of different statistical approaches.

First, we conduct a simple factor analysis to identify the dimensionality of our eight indicators, pooling all observations over time. This gives us an indication of whether the indicators indeed load on a unidimensional underlying factor as implied by Norris. We supplement this analysis through additional factor analyses using the 10th wave of the European Social Survey (ESS ERIC, 2023, 2025b). Second, to investigate how these items are ordered, we employ IRT. IRT tells us how well items differentiate between individuals across an assumed underlying latent trait θ (in this case, political support).

Specifically, using maximum likelihood estimation we estimate a graded IRT model using the *mirt* package in R (Chalmers, 2012), treating all items as ordinal. This yields a single discrimination parameter a per item, which indicates how well an item is overall able to differentiate individuals with higher and lower levels of θ . Additionally, depending on the items' scales, we obtain either 4 or 10 location parameters b_k , that denote where the probability of endorsing the item with level $\geq k$ is 50%. These are also the locations along θ , at which items provide the most information about the extent to which respondents exhibit the underlying trait.

In the example of Figure 3, item A is well-suited to distinguish between individuals, but only those with very low and medium-low political support (θ). Meanwhile, item B differentiates only between those with higher political support and does so less effectively.

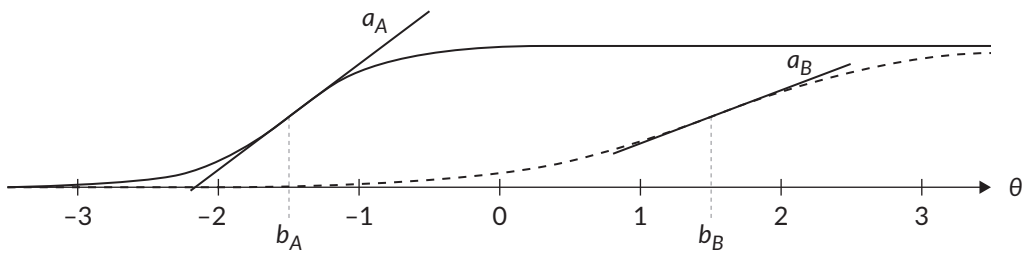


Figure 3. Intuition behind IRT models. Notes: Example using two binary items (A & B), with lines showing probability of answering affirmatively; a_A, a_B stand for the discrimination (slope) parameters; b_A, b_B stand for the difficulty (location) parameters.

Next, to learn about the directionality and temporality of effects between pairs of political support, we leverage the panel structure of the GLES data and move towards multilevel regression models. First, we estimate a series of structural equation models, specifically RI-CLPMs. These models decompose our repeated measurements into three components: grand means at wave t , a respondent-invariant between, and a time-varying within component (Mulder & Hamaker, 2021).

Figure 4 shows the general set-up of these models, which we implemented using *lavaan* (Rosseel, 2012) following the practical guide by Mulder (2025). The within-person component, indicated by the prefix W , represents the divergence of individuals' time-varying X_t and Y_t from their stable random intercepts. α denotes autoregressive paths, while γ represents the within-person cross-lagged effects we are most interested in. They tell us whether a measure of X or Y at point $t-1$ that is unusually high or low for that individual predicts a lower or higher than usual value in the other measure at point t . Importantly, this approach therefore factors out whether respondents exhibit overall more or less political support and, by design, prevents the confounding of the investigated relationships by both respondent-specific characteristics (e.g., sex, age) and overall time trends.

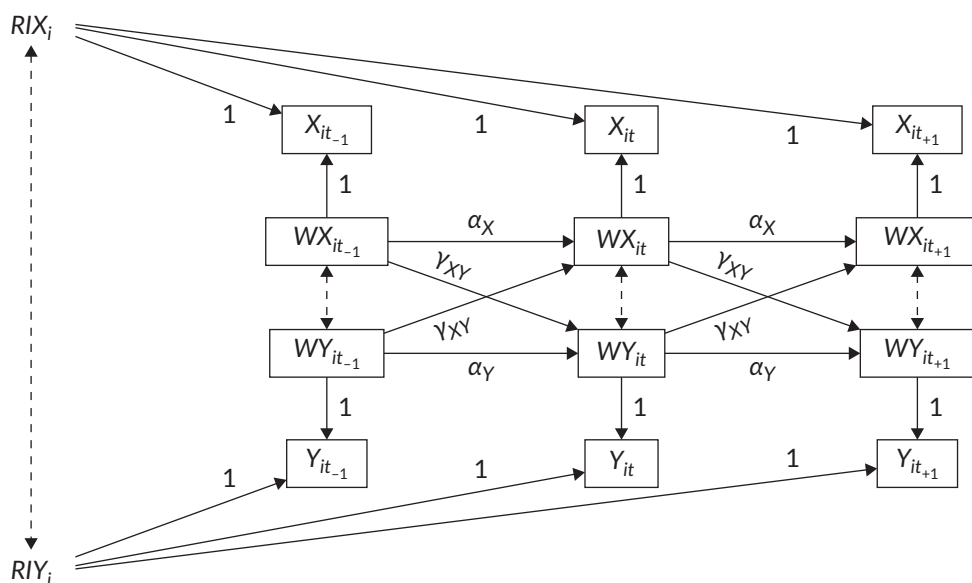


Figure 4. Intuition behind RI-CLPMs. Note: Inspired by Figure 1 in Mulder and Hamaker (2021).

As we are focused on overall patterns, we constrain all α and γ to be stable across time. To improve sample size, we estimate models with unbalanced panel data where each individual's likelihood function is computed only based on the waves they actually participated in. However, as robustness checks, we re-run these models, once using listwise deletion, which creates balanced panels (Table A9), and once allowing coefficients to differ between the chancellorships of Angela Merkel and Olaf Scholz (Table A10).

Lastly, to investigate whether prior depletion of “water levels” in the reservoir of goodwill strengthens the effect of further specific dissatisfaction, we estimate a series of first-difference models following this general specification:

$$Y_{t-t_1} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{t-t_1} + \beta_2 \bar{X}_{t_1:t_3} + \beta_3 (X_{t-t_1} \times \bar{X}_{t_1:t_3}) + \beta_4 T$$

Essentially, we expect the effect of ΔX on ΔY to be moderated by respondents' average level of X in the three prior waves (t_{-1} to t_{-3}). If a well-filled reservoir indeed prevents specific support changes from translating directly into diffuse support changes (i.e., positive β_1), we would expect the interaction coefficient β_3 to be negative. To account for the multilevel data structure, we add wave fixed effects T and report respondent-clustered standard errors.

5. Analysis

We begin with a descriptive look at changes in the eight political support indicators over time. Table A5 provides summary statistics, while Figure 5 visualizes wave averages. Note that we consistently use a yellow–red palette for the theoretically most diffuse support items, a green palette for the most specific support items, and a purple–blue palette for indicators towards the center of Norris's conceptualization. First, it is noticeable that diffuse indicators such as opposition to dictatorship or identification with Germany are indeed much more stable over time. The specific indicators, satisfaction with the government or the chancellor, fluctuate more and especially strongly during Covid and following the 2021 cabinet change.

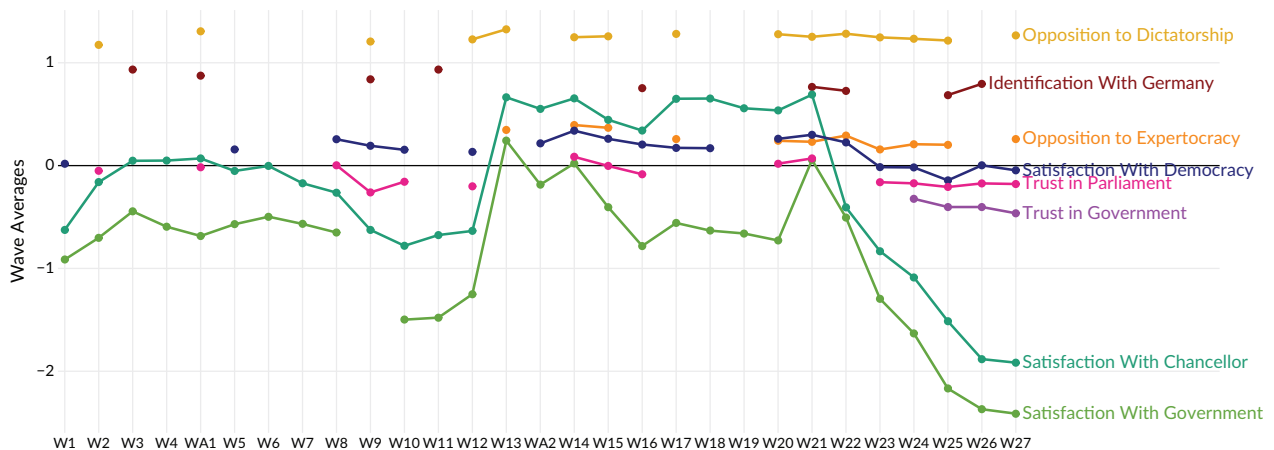


Figure 5. Wave averages of political support indicators. Notes: Here, for all variables, 0 indicates the central scale position (Satisfaction With Chancellor/Government thus ranges from -5 to $+5$, all others from -2 to $+2$); waves WA1 and WA2 represent samples added during the 2017 and 2021 election campaign.

More subtle, but aligned with the ESS data, democratic satisfaction is incrementally declining in the final waves, similar to trust in the government. The descriptive evidence substantiates (a) the theoretical notion that diffuse indicators are more stable, and to some extent (b) the concerns about potential declines in political support.

5.1. Dimensionality and Ordering

Starting our descriptive investigation into the dimensionality of political support, factor analysis suggests that all eight indicators indeed load onto a common underlying dimension, with a potential second factor reaching only an eigenvalue of 0.33 (Figure A2). Nevertheless, Table A6 shows factor loadings from both a 1- and 2-factor solution. The institutional trust items show the strongest association with the single-factor solution (0.89, 0.85). Meanwhile, items towards the ends of the specific–diffuse continuum show the weakest association. The relatively low loadings of the three most diffuse indicators (0.31, 0.27, 0.24) could offer some support for Easton’s two-type conceptualization. However, the possible second factor mostly represents the two opposition to dictatorship/expertocracy items and not the even more diffuse national identification one. This could hint at the reversed wording as an additional source of variation that researchers should be aware of. All in all, we prefer the 1-factor solution, especially since extracting two factors only explains marginally more overall variance in the underlying data (6%), and interpret these results as aligning with Norris’s view of political support as essentially one-dimensional.

Using data from the 10th wave of the ESS fielded in 2020 (ESS ERIC, 2023, 2025b), we run additional factor analyses using a set of comparable items including satisfaction with the government and democracy, trust in politicians, parties, and parliament, the importance of living in a democracy, the acceptance of a strongman leader, and the emotional attachment to respondents’ home country (Table A4). Whether pooling the data or investigating each of the 31 countries separately, in each case parallel analysis suggests 1-factor solutions as most fitting (Figure A3), even though the eigenvalues of a possible second factor vary somewhat between countries. Table A7 then shows the extracted pooled and country-specific factor loadings. In line with our main analysis, the strongest associations are generally found with the trust items, somewhat smaller with the satisfaction items, and weakest with the arguably most diffuse items asking about the importance of democracy and emotional attachments. While a detailed discussion of country patterns is beyond the scope of this article, we encourage future comparative engagement with, for example, possibly systematic variation in the structure of political support between North-West and South-East Europe.

For now, we turn towards IRT modelling to further understand the structure of the underlying trait identified in our GLES data. Table A8 reports the item parameters, while Figures 6 and 7 illustrate how response probabilities vary across levels of political support (θ) and where each item provides the most information.

First, respondents’ tendency to choose scale end- or mid-points is reflected by disproportionately high selection probabilities across items (Figure 6). Second, the 11-point items differentiate better among respondents with relatively positive views. For example, the most negative category immediately becomes the likely response for anyone below neutral evaluations of the chancellor.

The five-step items fall into two patterns. For some (both trust measures and satisfaction with democracy), response values are well-ordered, higher answers become increasingly likely with higher θ , and each category dominates at some point. For the three diffuse support items, this structure breaks down. Most

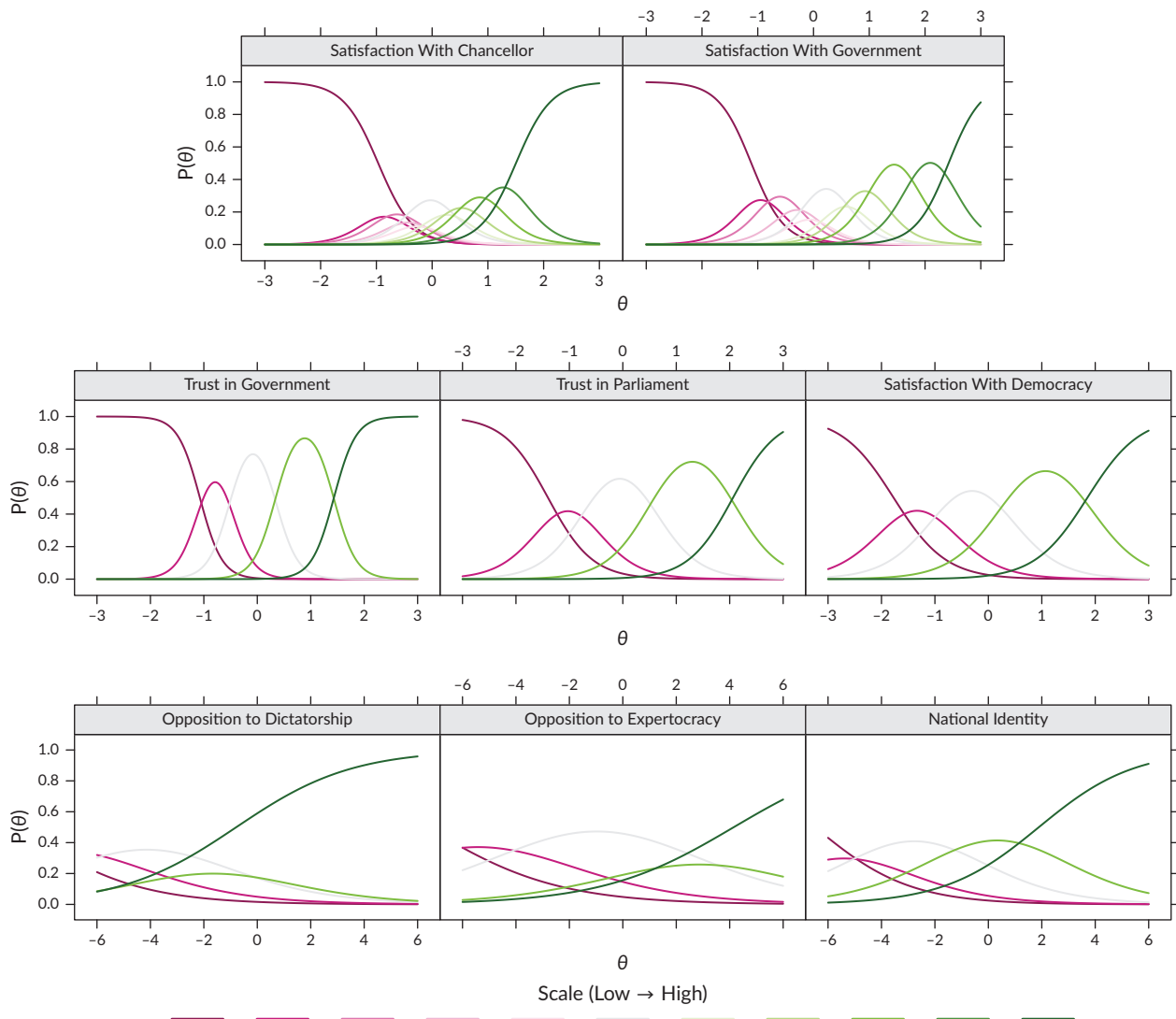


Figure 6. IRT results: Traceplots. Notes: Based on the parameters estimated in Table A8; curves show the estimated probability of selecting a specific answer category based on respondents' estimated level of θ (their political support).

notably, full opposition to dictatorship is the most likely response even at comparatively low levels of political support, at which point the most likely response becomes a “partly” rejection of dictatorship. Contrarily, across a wide range of θ , this central category is the most likely response to the expertocracy item, with intermediate categories very rarely chosen.

These patterns indicate that the diffuse support items' response scales might be too fine-grained. Substantially, they could either suggest that citizens universally still possess at least this foundational level of political support or that respondents hide truthful attitudes due to social desirability. This mandates a careful interpretation of these common indicators. Social desirability could also be a reason why these items correlate worse with the singular latent political support factor in the previous analysis. Conversely, it could hide the existence of a distinct second support dimension.

In any case, due to their response patterns, these diffuse items are unable to differentiate well between respondents along the here identified unidimensional underlying trait. This is corroborated by the diffuse items' information curves (Figure 7), which illustrate that they provide very limited information about respondents' placement on the underlying trait, even at low levels of θ (political support).

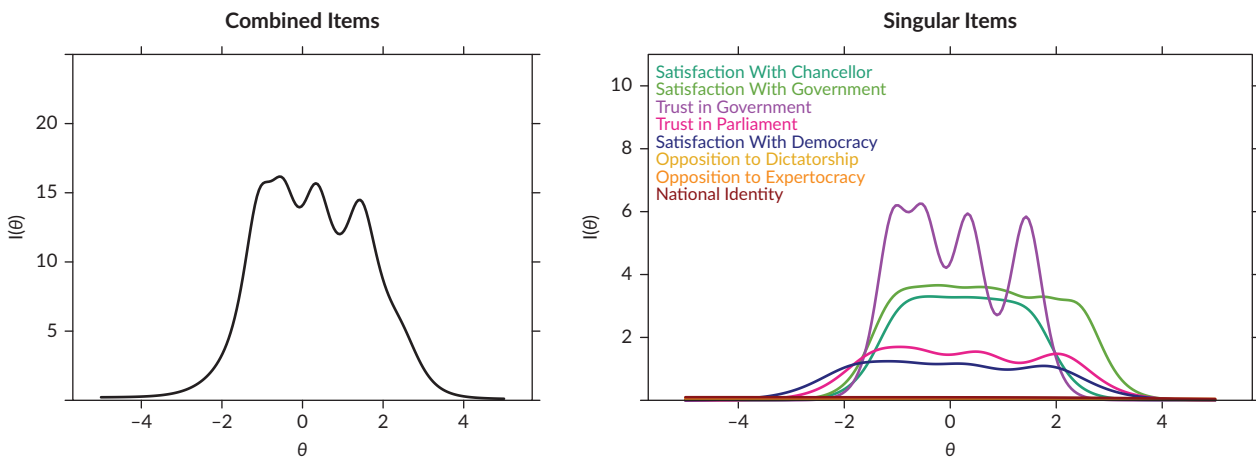


Figure 7. IRT results: Information curves. Notes: Based on the parameters estimated in Table A8; curves show the information provided by each item (i.e., how well an item distinguishes between respondents of higher or lower θ) at a given point of θ (respondents' political support).

Meanwhile, all other items provide substantial information across a wider range of θ . Satisfaction with democracy and parliamentary trust are the items best suited to differentiate respondents with low political support and are equally informative even for respondents with relatively high levels of θ . Towards the center of the political support distribution, however, both satisfaction with the government and satisfaction with the chancellor, and especially governmental trust, provide comparatively much more information about respondents' θ . As the items cluster at this location, researchers under survey time constraints could opt to capture only one of these items: For example, trust in government, as it provides the most information, or satisfaction with the government, which performs slightly better across a wider range of higher θ .

Even though the items strongly overlap, their tentative ordering is in line with Norris (2011) and our subsequent expectations. Going back to Figure 2, more specific indicators are better to measure the support levels in higher-located basins, whereas institutional trust and democratic satisfaction capture variation in relatively deeper reservoirs. At the same time, as visualized by the combined information curve, those with very low political support are not captured well, signifying that current instruments are not well-suited to measure the water levels of pools located towards the bottom.

5.2. Temporal Dynamics

Now, we turn towards regression analyses to investigate the interplay and temporality of variations in political support indicators. Table 1 reports the estimated cross-lagged effects (γ), sample sizes, and wave combinations for 12 bivariate RI-CLPMs. For clarity, we omit autoregressive effects, random intercepts, and contemporaneous covariation from this presentation.

Table 1. RI-CLPM results.

DV	Lagged IV	Est.	p-Value	No. Respondents & Waves
Satisfaction With Chancellor	Trust in Government	0.050	0.00	9,739
Trust in Government	Satisfaction With Chancellor	0.091	0.00	24, 25, 26, 27
Satisfaction With Chancellor	Trust in Parliament	0.035	0.00	21,384
Trust in Parliament	Satisfaction With Chancellor	0.147	0.00	2, 8–10, 12, 14–16, 20, 21, 23–27
Satisfaction With Chancellor	Satisfaction With Democracy	0.029	0.00	23,013
Satisfaction With Democracy	Satisfaction With Chancellor	0.133	0.00	1, 5, 8–10, 12, 14–18, 20–27
Satisfaction With Government	Trust in Government	0.019	0.12	9,869
Trust in Government	Satisfaction With Government	0.064	0.00	24, 25, 26, 27
Satisfaction With Government	Trust in Parliament	0.090	0.00	20,812
Trust in Parliament	Satisfaction With Government	0.133	0.00	2, 8, 10, 12, 14–16, 20, 21, 23–27
Satisfaction With Government	Satisfaction With Democracy	0.078	0.00	22,884
Satisfaction With Democracy	Satisfaction With Government	0.120	0.00	1, 5, 8, 10, 12, 14–18, 20–27
Trust in Government	Trust in Parliament	0.012	0.32	9,870
Trust in Parliament	Trust in Government	0.015	0.22	24, 25, 26, 27
Trust in Parliament	Satisfaction With Democracy	0.102	0.00	20,370
Satisfaction With Democracy	Trust in Parliament	0.103	0.00	8–10, 12, 14–16, 20, 21, 23–27
Trust in Government	Satisfaction With Democracy	0.043	0.00	9,868
Satisfaction With Democracy	Trust in Government	0.026	0.03	24, 25, 26, 27
Satisfaction With Democracy	Identification With Germany	0.021	0.00	14,613
Identification With Germany	Satisfaction With Democracy	0.047	0.00	9, 16, 21, 22, 25, 26
Satisfaction With Democracy	Opposition to Dictatorship	0.014	0.00	17,526
Opposition to Dictatorship	Satisfaction With Democracy	0.021	0.00	9, 12, 14, 15, 17, 20–25, 27
Satisfaction With Democracy	Opposition to Expertocracy	0.015	0.00	16,085
Opposition to Expertocracy	Satisfaction With Democracy	0.037	0.00	14, 15, 17, 20–25, 27

Notes: Results from maximum likelihood structural equation models (RI-CLPM) obtained using the *lavaan* package in R (Rosseel, 2012); model set-up follows the recommendations by Mulder (2025); unbalanced panel, meaning each individual's likelihood function is computed only based on the waves they actually participated in; all variables scaled and centered prior to estimation, which makes coefficients comparable across models and indicative of the within-respondent impact of a 1 SD change in the lagged IV.

The results provide no evidence that changes in specific support indicators systematically precede changes in diffuse ones. Across all 12 models (24 cross-lagged paths), all effects are positive and only three are statistically insignificant. Two of those occur in the model linking trust in government and trust in parliament. This may reflect that changes in respondents' evaluation of the government and parliament as a whole (including the opposition) can reasonably diverge, especially among partisans of government or opposition parties.

As all variables are scaled before estimation, effect magnitudes are comparable. It is noticeable that changes in satisfaction with the chancellor or the government have a stronger impact on governmental or parliamentary trust than vice versa. Similarly, changes in satisfaction with democracy predict changes in opposition to expertocracy or dictatorship and identification with Germany roughly twice as strong as reversed. Both patterns could suggest that, despite the overall reciprocity, changes in specific indicators translate more easily into subsequent changes in more diffuse indicators than reversed. Additionally, eroding satisfaction with democracy might function as an early warning signal of changes in diffuse political support. Hence, its current decline (Figure 5) should not be taken lightly.

To test the robustness of these findings, we first estimate the same models using listwise deletion, which effectively creates a balanced panel to rule out that our results are driven by changing sample composition. The resulting changes in coefficients and significance levels are marginal (Table A9) and do not change our overall interpretation. We further estimate a model allowing for the coefficients to vary based on who is chancellor at the time of the survey to investigate possible period trends (remember that singular wave-specific patterns are netted out by design). Mostly, the coefficients do not vary meaningfully between the two leaders' tenures. We find, however, differences regarding the within-respondent relationship between deviations in satisfaction with democracy, opposition to dictatorship, and national identification.

During Merkel's tenure, the former are not linked at all. Changes in satisfaction with democracy equally do not trigger subsequent changes in national identification. Reversed, a deviation in national identification even predicts a significant subsequent change in democratic satisfaction *in the opposite direction*. Together, this indicates, to some extent, a mental separation of citizens' more specific and diffuse support levels. During Scholz's tenure, all these relationships are then reciprocally significant, substantial, and moving in the same direction. These differences warrant further inspection in future studies as they suggest that the relationship between democratic satisfaction and more diffuse political support levels might be period-dependent, for example due to cabinet composition or the presence of a strong right-wing party.

Overall, however, declines in any indicator at time t almost universally predict declines in another at $t+1$ across model choices, albeit at different strength levels. Contrary to expectations of a purely sequential erosion beginning with specific support, the pattern thus largely resembles a self-reinforcing dynamic. If the recent decreases shown in Figure 5 persist, such a dynamic could have substantial implications for German democracy. At the same time, improvements at any level could provide a positive impulse that can be equally reinforcing. This creates opportunities for civil society actors to target specific components of political support, for example by promoting policy successes, fostering trust in parliament, or strengthening anti-authoritarian and anti-technocratic norms, with the aim of generating positive spillovers into adjacent support levels.

5.3. The Reservoir of Goodwill

Finally, we examine whether the impact of changes in specific support on more diffuse support is contingent on respondents' prior level of specific support. The "reservoir of goodwill" analogy suggests that respondents with a previously higher average specific support level can tolerate a short-term decrease of specific support without it translating into declines of diffuse support. Meanwhile, it should lead to stronger declines in diffuse support for respondents with already lower specific support. We operationalize the

“water level” of respondents’ reservoirs by calculating averages across the previous three waves. As this necessarily excludes the first three waves of each observation from the models, we only consider indicators present in at least 10 waves. Given the evidence that economic evaluations can shape citizens’ political support (Daoust & Nadeau, 2021; Loveless & Binelli, 2020; Nadeau et al., 2019, 2020), we also include a linear predictor here that measures respondents’ evaluation of the national economy on a five-point scale from *very bad* (0) to *very good* (5). This item can be construed as a very specific indicator of political support approximating citizens’ evaluation of the government’s performance in a specific issue-area, making it well-suited to test the theoretical implications of a “reservoir of goodwill.”

Figure 8 visualizes the mixed evidence reported in Table A11. Figure 8a fully aligns with our expectations: Changes in specific indicators between waves t and t_{-1} are more weakly related to simultaneous changes in

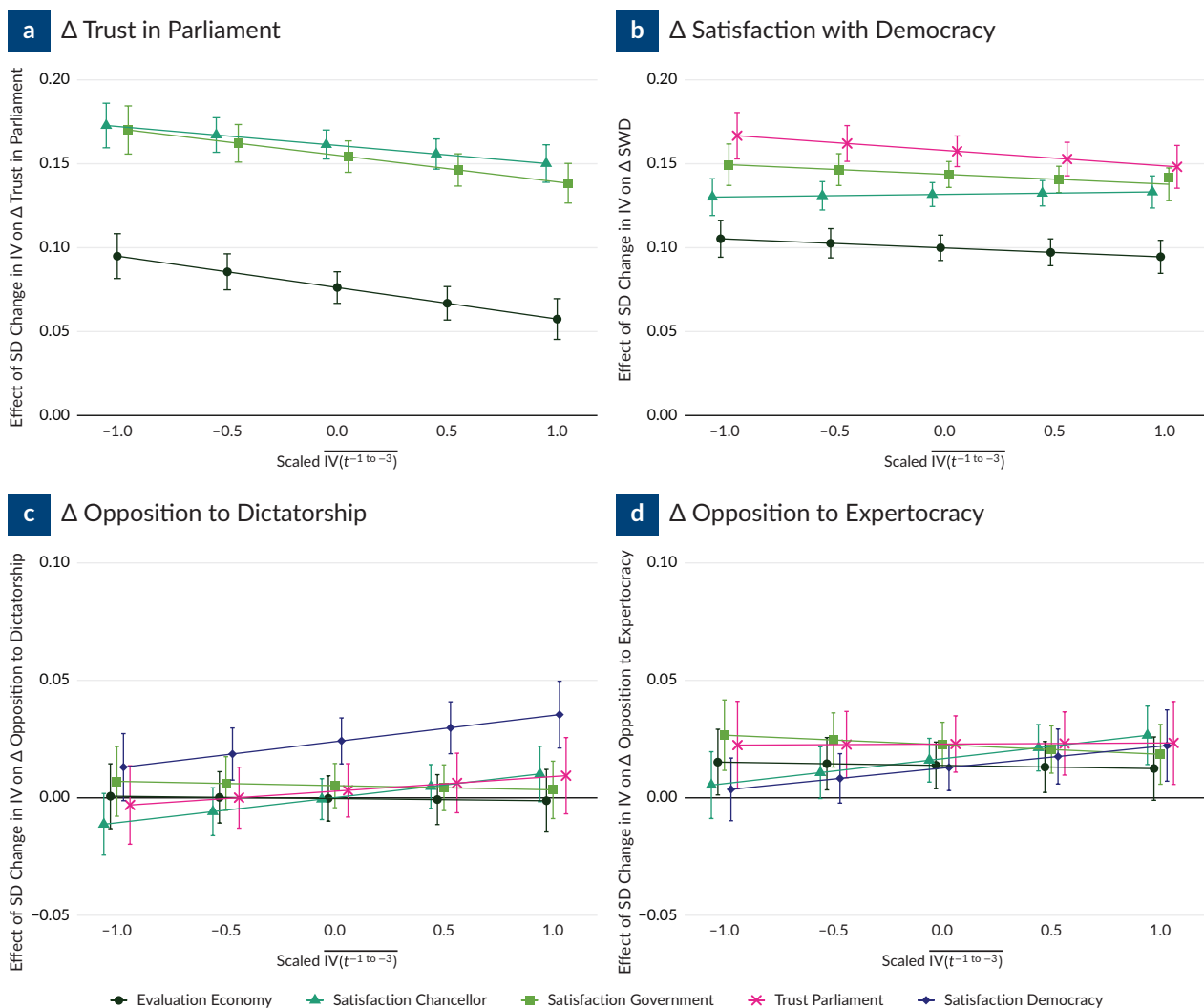


Figure 8. Effect of SD changes on (a) trust in parliament; (b) satisfaction with democracy; (c) opposition to dictatorship; and (d) opposition to expertocracy. Notes: Based on results of pooled linear regressions using respondent-clustered standard errors and wave fixed effects reported in Table A11; Y-axes denote DV; coloured lines indicate different models, each using a different IV; all variables are scaled to make effects comparable; an effect strength of k can be interpreted as a k SD change in the DV associated with a one SD change in the IV over the range of the IV’s average level in the previous three waves.

parliamentary trust amongst respondents with high prior specific support. But moderation effect sizes are relatively small. For example, a one SD decline in satisfaction with the chancellor is associated with a 0.16 SD decline in trust in parliament at average prior satisfaction with the chancellor. For respondents with a one SD higher prior level, this erosion reduces only slightly to 0.15.

The strongest moderation occurs for changing evaluations of the economy ($\beta = -0.19$). Besides that, no other model returns moderations in line with expectations. In fact, for satisfaction with democracy and satisfaction with the chancellor, changes are significantly *more strongly* associated with changing opposition to dictatorship (Figure 8c) when previous levels are high. The same is true for the link from changes in satisfaction with the chancellor and opposition to expertocracy (Figure 8d).

Similar to the RI-CLPMs above, as a robustness check, we investigate period-specific patterns by re-running the same models, once applied only to waves under Merkel's tenure (Table A12), once only to waves under Scholz's tenure (Table A13). Here, all unexpected positive moderation effects all become insignificant. But the most notable difference to the main analysis regards the three significant interactions in Figure 8a: The economic evaluation interaction is largely driven by and only significant during the Scholz period, while the other two are non-existent in that time and only manifest significantly during the Merkel era. This hints at the fact that the power of previous evaluations to buffer against a negative effect of contemporary changes in one's specific political support also depends on the political context.

Overall, evidence for a systematic moderating effect of prior specific support in line with a reservoir of goodwill-argument is limited. Patterns consistent with this expectation appear only in a few models and should thus not be overstated.

6. Conclusion and Outlook

In this study, we focus on 29 waves of the GLES panel and use a combination of factor analysis, IRT modelling, RI-CLPMs, and first-difference models to evaluate expectations about the structure and interplay of political support derived from seminal literature (Easton, 1957, 1975; Norris, 1999, 2011) and recent studies (e.g., Claassen & Magalhães, 2022; Mauk, 2020). Our aim was (a) to clarify political support's latent structure, (b) to investigate temporal dynamics of specific and diffuse support, and (c) to inform measurement practices.

As expected, descriptive patterns show that specific support indicators fluctuate more over time, while diffuse support is relatively stable. Additionally, reflecting concerns about democratic backsliding, recent data indicate declines in multiple indicators.

Factor analysis suggests all eight considered indicators load on a single factor, which is best represented by the institutional trust and satisfaction items, while the more diffuse items only correlate weakly. We supplement this analysis with a cross-country investigation of ESS data, resulting in very similar factor structures throughout.

Graded IRT models then indicate that, as expected, specific evaluations capture variation at slightly higher support levels, whereas the somewhat more diffuse attitudes like satisfaction with democracy also

differentiate respondents at lower levels, albeit less clearly. The most information is provided by the governmental trust and satisfaction items. These insights are relevant for applied survey researchers under time constraints who, depending on their explicit research goal, can make a more informed decision on which item is most likely to capture the desired variation. Importantly, the three most diffuse items do not contribute meaningfully to our understanding of respondents' trait levels. For practical research, this might suggest that these items are too fine-grained or suffer from social desirability (cf. Bischof et al., 2023; Kaftan, 2024).

For us, this potential social desirability combined with the abstract nature of the available indicators might also constrain insights on the structural component of political support. As Hu et al. (2025) demonstrate, such abstract democratic support might differ from concrete democratic preferences. It is thus possible that a second, more diffuse dimension exists in citizens' minds, but that current indicators are unable to pick up on this. Therefore, our findings largely support the expectation of a unidimensional, ordered conceptualization of political support in line with Norris (2011).

Moving on to the temporal investigation, RI-CLPMs reveal weak evidence that changes in specific support systematically precede changes in diffuse support. To some extent, effect sizes flowing from more specific to more diffuse indicators are larger. But overall, changes in any indicator generally predict subsequent changes in others, rather suggesting self-reinforcing dynamics.

Finally, first-difference models again provide limited evidence in line with an expected buffering effect of a "reservoir of goodwill" (Easton, 1965; Mauk, 2020). Prior low levels of specific support do not meaningfully amplify the effects of subsequent declines. Conversely, the diffuse support of individuals with previously higher levels of specific support (i.e., with a larger reservoir of goodwill) is not systematically more resilient against changes in specific political support.

Overall, this study foremost advances understanding of the structure and dynamics of political support by applying a host of statistical modelling approaches to high-quality panel data. With new empirical evidence, our findings speak to conceptual debates on specific versus diffuse support and provide both substantive insights for the study of democratic attitudes and practical recommendations for future survey research. As democracies increasingly face institutional mistrust, polarization, and declining democratic satisfaction, such insights are crucial for tracking emerging risks and assessing democratic resilience.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The GLES data is made available by GESIS at <https://www.gesis.org/gles>. The ESS data can be accessed at <https://ess.sikt.no/en>

LLMs Disclosure

The authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) for writing and coding assistance. The authors reviewed and edited its output and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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