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# **The Trust-Transparency Matrix as a comparative tool: developing a research framework**

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## **Abstract**

Though the link between trust and transparency is a central concern of social science, the relationship between the two concepts has remained a 'black box'. Trust and transparency need to be qualified to be understood and captured in a meaningful sense by empirical research. Hence, the article proposes an interpretative matrix for exploring relationships between types of trust and transparency. It presents a framework of analysis that is sufficiently precise to make sense of complex interactions in six European regions in three European states (the UK, Germany, and France) and sufficiently generic to have a heuristic value as a tool for comparative study. It also contributes to broader discussions of the role of trust and transparency as factors of public management. The framework might equally be applied to evaluating trust and transparency as modes of public action in relation to existential crises such as over health or the environment.

Trust has long been identified as an essential component of social, economic, and political life. Since the 1990s, as Newton (2007, p. 342) notes, there has been an ‘explosion of interest’ in the concept driven by its perceived decline and reengagement with concepts of social capital (Braithwaite & Levi, 1998; Fukuyama, 1995; Hardin, 2006; Putnam, 2000; Seligman, 1997; Warren, 1999; Zmerli & Hooghe, 2011). But what is understood by trust? Levi (1998, p. 79, quoted in Newton, 2007, p. 343) noted that trust ‘is not one thing and it does not have one source; it has a variety of forms and causes’. Across the academic literature trust has been defined, conceptualised, and operationalised in myriad ways. Various understandings of trust have been identified, including as the product of interpersonal relationships (Rousseau et al., 1998), in terms of strategic interactions (Lenard, 2005), as a potential consequence of democratic deliberation (Fisher et al., 2010), as an indicator of social capital (Keele, 2007), or as an absolute moral disposition (Uslaner, 2002). Trust is understood as a generic term to describe dynamics taking place at different levels of analysis (interpersonal, social, and collective); in relation to specific properties (competence, honesty, and benevolence) and according to distinct types (inter alia inter-personal, social, and institutional).

Another essentially contestable concept is that of transparency. Transparency refers to ‘the characteristic of being easy to see through’ (Cambridge Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>). As a concept, transparency underpins a diverse set of literatures, ranging from participatory democracy, ethics, and fair processes to policy instruments and new public management (based on transparent procedures and indicators and clear incentives). At the intersection of administrative, managerial, and political dynamics, transparency is celebrated as the remedy to restore financial performance; to enhance democratic efficiency; and to increase accountability mechanisms, ensuring openness and

honesty (Cucciniello et al., 2017; Heald, 2006). For ‘optimists’, transparency is valued for having

a trust – enhancing effect. Worthy and Grimmelikhuijsen (2012, p. 5) argue that ‘transparency helps people become more familiar with government and brings them closer together and creates understanding’. From this perspective, transparency is a cardinal democratic virtue, with accountability as the foundation of the democratic constitution.

One way to clarify the uncertainty surrounding the concepts of trust and transparency is to examine the connection between them, a topic that has attracted substantial attention in recent social science literature (Cucciniello et al., 2017; Grimmelikhuijsen & Welch, 2012; Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012; Piotrowski et al., 2017; Porumbescu, 2015; Porumbescu et al., 2022). There are mixed findings regarding the relationships between trust and transparency within the existing literature. One reason for this is that we do not know how transparency influences trust, or at the very least attempts to resolve this question are contested, and therefore, the relationship between trust and transparency has remained a ‘black box’. Many empirical studies concentrate solely on verifying whether transparency impacts trust and do not elaborate on the mechanisms that facilitate this relationship. We acknowledge the strong link between the trust and transparency literatures, though they are not co-substantial. The article demonstrates that close trust-transparency synergy is only one configuration and that the trust-transparency relationships are themselves subject to contingent pressures and likely to change over time.

The problem being addressed in this article is defined as the trust-transparency nexus and the contribution offered is that of the trust-transparency matrix. The intellectual challenge involves presenting a framework of analysis that is sufficiently precise to make sense of complex interactions in six European regions, our empirical terrain, and sufficiently generic to have a

heuristic value as a tool for comparative study. The four-quadrant matrix presented in this article follows an accepted mode of qualitative enquiry, inspired in part by Meijer et al.'s (2018) groundbreaking framework for understanding transparency. The empirical cases in this article concern most particularly the operation of territorial (policy) communities in comparable regions in the three leading European countries, but the framework has a more general resonance.

### **Methods and materials**

This matrix outlined within this paper provides an interpretative framework that centres on perceptions drawn from extensive empirical fieldwork with comparative actors (in six regions and three countries). The project covers various types of data: extensive documentary analysis, literature review, secondary and primary statistical analysis (Cole et al., 2018) and, above all, comparable interview panels based on purposive samples (Stafford et al., 2022). In each region, we targeted functionally comparable actors, consisting of political groups represented in the territorial Assembly, civil society groups involved in close institutional and territorial interactions, transparency focussed associations (freedom of information, anti-corruption), charities, and moral entrepreneurs (e.g. churches, religious groups) and bureaux within territorial government and public administration. Fieldwork was completed across the six sub-regional cases from 2016 to 2018 and just under 100 interviews took place. Interviews were identified to the researchers by a code/number combination, consistent with the recommendations of the institutional ethics committee (SREC/160317/05) and the full anonymised interviews were placed with the UK Data archive (details withheld for peer review). The full list of interviews is available on request.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In the United Kingdom, 39 interviews were carried out, with an average duration of one hour (21 in Wales and 18 in North West England). They comprised stakeholders in the fields of public affairs, think tanks, local government officers, the transport sector, education, the media, the voluntary sector, environment, health, housing, trade unions and local and regional politicians. In France, 39 interviews were also conducted from 2016 to 2018,

It is always necessary to make choices in relation to using data for specific purposes, especially in a cross-national data rich project. In the paper, we focus more on using selected interviews to elucidate precise examples of the mechanisms in play, drawn from the three countries, rather than engaging in a corpus wide content analysis (mapped out in Stafford et al., 2022); or presenting statistical data (presented in Cole et al., 2018). Investigations took place based on qualitative research modes of inquiry, based on interview-based purposive sampling, along with expert prior knowledge of the empirical terrains. The Framework of Analysis is based on empirically derived perceptions of trust-transparency relationships by stakeholders engaged in comparable situations. Hence, it is mainly perception based, rather than involving real-time data (for example, via continuous monitoring of municipal websites or freedom of information requests). The method used – focussed comparison using semi-structured interviews – is appropriate to the task at hand, as well as opening other perspectives for future inquiry, including the use of statistical and experimental tools.

Trust and transparency operate at distinct yet sometimes overlapping levels of social and political reality. The matrix presented here developed as a tool to explore trust-transparency dynamics in multi-level governance settings in three European states: the UK, Germany, and France. Six regions (Wales and North-West England in the UK; Hesse and Saxony-Anhalt in Germany; Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes and Bretagne in France) were selected from across the spectrum of the Regional Authority Index initially developed by Hooghe et al. (2010). This is a comparative case study (Bennett & George 2005, p. 6), with cases covering a range of

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with an average duration of one hour (18 in Bretagne and 21 in Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes). Stakeholders included trade unions, local and regional politicians, business representatives, voluntary sector actors, the media, officials from the planning and housing sectors, environmental and energy groups and cultural stakeholders. In Germany, 19 interviews were held (10 in Hesse and 9 in Saxony-Anhalt), with access substantially more difficult than in the two other countries. They comprised stakeholders in the fields of the media, local and regional politicians, public information broadcasters, the education sector, faith groups, local government, business, and the voluntary sector.

different administrative contexts at the state level: a federal state (Germany), a predominantly unitary state modified by forms of asymmetrical devolution (UK) and a decentralised but still unitary state (France). Comparative case studies can combine intrinsic and instrumental dimensions, with case studies potentially bridging various dimensions on the ideographic-nomothetic spectrum (Windelband & Oates, 1980). This article uses cases as foundations for theory building in relation to the interplay between trust and transparency in the comparative context of multi-level governance in leading European countries. Insofar as distinctions make sense, this paper falls more heavily on the instrumental side than the intrinsic one, in that cases are judged by their capacity to add substance to the various mechanisms of human interaction from fieldwork.

### **Building the trust-transparency matrix**

The process of building the Trust-Transparency Matrix in this paper draws on a similar approach to that outlined by Eisenhardt (1989, 2021). It involves starting from an initial definition of a broad research question, involving theoretical sampling of case studies and stopping once the incremental improvement to the theoretical framework is achieved. Therefore, in the formulation of Munro (2009), our utilisation of case studies lies between theory-generating and theory-testing approaches, although it shares more similarities with the former and grounded theory than the latter. Eisenhardt (1989, pp. 546–547) identifies three core strengths of this approach: the likelihood of generating novel theory, the likelihood of generating testable constructs, and the likelihood that the resultant theory will be empirically valid. However, there are also potential weaknesses: for example, Eisenhardt (1989, p. 547) notes that theories built in this way can be ‘overly complex’ due to the ‘temptation to build theory which tries to capture everything’ or the lack of generality due their focus on a ‘narrow



and idiosyncratic' range of case studies. In developing the Trust-Transparency Matrix, we have tried to maximise the former, and minimise the latter, for example by starting with a clear sense of the concepts, or in Eisenhardt's (1989, p. 536) terms the 'constructs', that underpin our research questions, and refining the design of the matrix to ensure that the categories are not overly case-specific but can be applied across cases that fall outside of this study.

The proposed framework of analysis operates within a broader context that encompasses several dimensions (of inter-personal, social, political, and institutional trust). The matrix takes as a significant starting point that the implications and meaning of trust and transparency are highly contextual. We engage with Zmerli and Newton's (2011) three level of trust framework and contend that the Trust-Transparency relationship can encompass distinct levels of analysis. In terms of inter-personal relations, the trust-transparency relationship can be understood as the accepted rules of interactions between individuals and, by extension, groups, or close institutions. Several examples from interviews are presented in the main body of the article. Intermediate or social trust relationships concern the actors of meso-level governance of the type covered by the empirical cases in the article. The core use of the matrix is that of meso-level ('institutional') inquiry. At the macro-level: broader societal concerns and evolution also form part of the context within which institutional relationships operate. The matrix is situated in the context of deeper societal trends, which include factors such as the importance of freedom of information, the rise of digital transparency, the prevalence of 24-hour news media, and role of social networks and information bubbles.

To make sense of the trust-transparency matrix (theoretically), and to substantiate comparative differences (empirically), we also draw on the insights from distinct, yet cognate literatures: those of policy styles (Richardson, 1982), policy communities (Marsh & Rhodes, 1992) and

state traditions in particular (Dyson, 1980). The most convincing corpus concerns that of new institutionalism, understood as a broad body of theory encompassing distinct levels of analysis relevant to diverse institutional and organisational settings (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Hay, 2006; March & Olsen, 1989; Peters, 2011; Steinmo, 2008). For the purpose of analytical clarity, we identify three distinctive and relevant dimensions in the new institutionalist literature that encompass the values and interests of actors (logics of appropriateness or sense-making), institutional design (logics tied to the structures of decision-making), and the interdependent relationships that, in practice, constrain the operation of institutions (logics of interactions). Our interest lies primarily in the third of these dimensions; the logic of interactions in terms of the trust-transparency nexus, a process close to that described elsewhere as networked institutionalism, referring to formal and informal modes of institutionalisation of interorganisational dynamics (Cole, 2011). Logics of interaction are sensitive to styles of informal interaction (in France, UK, Germany, and elsewhere), as well as to the more formal structure of rules and modes of regulation.

The general context for this article – and most writings on trust since the turn of the century – was one of the decline in trust in Western democracies and, indeed, there are powerful causal narratives around the loss of trust in democratic politics that underpin much of the analysis (Algan and Cahuc, 2007; Jennings and Lodge, 2019; Jennings et al. 2021; Lenard, 2005; Weisskircher, 2020). However, the article is not directly concerned with ‘political trust’, understood by Hooghe and Zmerli (2011, p. 3) as a ‘very thin form of trust’ characterised by an ‘expectation that, on the whole, political leaders will act according to the rules of the game’, though the broader political context helps to shape observed interactions.

Trust-transparency relationships operate in diverse national and sub-national contexts, shaped by distinct historical legacies and policy styles. The trust-transparency matrix forms the main part of the article, privileging theoretical reflection over empirical depth. The aim is not to present a detailed presentation of research findings (see Stafford, 2022) but to ascend the ladder of generality and propose a generic approach to utilising trust and transparency in empirical research. The article develops a four-field matrix: first, as a way of navigating through the dense variety of research literature about trust and transparency, and second, as a heuristic tool for comparing cases in empirical research. Table 1 is deliberately parsimonious in outlining ideal types of the trust-transparency nexus and provides the logical states of trust and transparency that we might find in different cases.

Many contemporary studies of trust tend to test general propositions about inter-personal, collective, and political trust, linking attitudes to demographics and external variables, such as perceptions of government performance. In survey-based research, the combination of questions and indicators used to judge trust, as Levi and Stoker note (2000, pp. 476–477), evolved from a range of influential early studies by authors such as Stokes (1962), Easton (1965), and Gamson (1968). Datasets such as the Eurobarometer and the European Social Survey provide extensive aggregate-level findings and are usefully supplemented by a small number of national and sub-national-specific secondary data sources. This mainstream approach to measuring trust, often using single-item survey measures, is problematic (Bauer & Freitag, 2017). Seyd (2016, p. 3), for example, argues that these types of measures only weakly tap the background concept of trust and that they are unable to provide a generalised, as opposed to an incumbent-driven, assessment of the political system. For its part, the secondary data focused on transparency has grown steadily in recent years. Transparency indices do encompass some comparable measures, specifically the World Justice Project (WJP)'s Open

Government Index and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Open, Useful and Reusable Government Data index (OURdata index). However, both indexes employ relatively narrow conceptions of transparency around the accessibility of data.

**Table 1.** The trust-transparency matrix.

	Transparency	
Trust	High	Low
High	Synergy (+, +)	Blind Faith (+, -)
Low	Negligible or Counter-productive effects (-, +)	Dual Dysfunctionality (-, -)

In the field of transparency, neither qualitative nor quantitative approaches have come to dominate, and a small but influential strand of experimental studies has emerged. Attempts to measure transparency or the effects of transparency have focused on a wide range of areas, including computer-mediated transparency (Grimmelikhuijsen & Welch, 2012; Meijer, 2009), analysis of website content (Ferreira da Cruz et al., 2016; Grimmelikhuijsen & Welch, 2012), citizen-focused experiments (de Fine Licht, 2014; Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2014), data dissemination (Hollyer et al., 2014), public perceptions of transparency (Park & Blenkinsopp, 2011; Piotrowski et al., 2017; Porumbescu et al., 2017) the interplay between trust and accountability in non-governmental organisations (Keating & Thrandardottir, 2017) and survey experiments featuring requests for information (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2019; Worthy et al., 2017). However innovative, such methods are not best suited to capture real-life empirical interactions within territorial policy communities, the object of this inquiry.

The starting point for operationalising the trust-transparency matrix is that perceptions of both phenomena are contingent upon what Worthy and Grimmelikhuijsen (2012, p. 6) characterise as ‘external’ (the wider political environment) and ‘internal’ (individual-based) factors. The external or macro influences (within the context of our qualitative fieldwork) relate to the political context of the selected sub-national territories, notably in terms of the institutional configurations, identity mixes, and perceptions of social and cultural capital. The internal or micro influences relate to the specific experiences and perceptions of interviewees: for example, their past interactions with and predispositions towards other individuals and organisations. The trust-transparency matrix always involves some combination of internal and external variables (though the mix logically varies according to types of relationship and their underlying causal mechanisms).

The article now presents the four positions in the matrix.

### **Synergy: the ideal of mutually reinforcing trust and transparency**

Synergy describes the optimal scenario characterised by high levels of both trust and transparency. The interplay between the different dimensions of trust and transparency effectively binds individuals, organisations, and relationships, creating what might be characterised as Trust-Transparency Synergy, a ‘virtuous circle’ reminiscent of Huxham and Vangen’s (2005) trust-building loop and other process-based accounts. Huxham and Vangen (2005, p. 68) observed that initial modest steps were more likely to deliver successful outcomes, which in turn reinforce trusting attitudes and provide the foundations for more ambitious collaboration. In this position, there is a clear picture of how high levels of trust might shape the transparency of decision-making, policy content, and policy outcomes.

The synergy field rests on a process type argument, based on inter-personal and close institutional interactions. Edelenbos and Klijn (2007, p. 33) observe that trust ‘does not appear at a snap of a finger but must be built up in the interaction among actors’. Evidence from detailed interactions in the field provided numerous examples of inter-personal and institutional trust being built in these types of iterative processes. In both Northwest England and Wales, for example, the characterisation of the trust-transparency nexus was often close to one of ‘synergy’. In interviews, transparency was characterised as a key element in building the core dimensions of trust. One interviewee reflected that transparency was a necessary ingredient for building trust, stating that ‘I don’t think you can have trust until you’ve got transparency’ (Interview WAL03). A degree of openness and understanding were understood as being key building blocks for positive perceptions of the competence, benevolence, and honesty of both civil society actors and government partners (Interview WAL18). Importantly, this did not necessarily mean that actors agreed on all issues, but that there was a transparency regarding the ‘red lines’ for different actors and therefore trust-building was not undermined by either unrealistic expectations or repeated failures of collaboration (Interview WAL08).

Both internal and external factors came into play in shaping the specific character and dynamics of the trust-transparency nexus. For example, there was a contrast within the UK cases shaped by the different trajectories of the governance arrangements and history of collaboration. In the Northwest, there was greater stress placed on the formalisation of relationships via compacts and concordats, partly due to a desire to recognise the rules of engagement but also in an explicit attempt to ensure that relationships were resilient and not entirely reliant on interpersonal linkages. A local government politician noted that the Memorandums of Understanding had been ‘helpful to signify publicly and externally that we are an organisation willing to work in partnership with other players on particular things to improve the health of

people in Greater Manchester' (Interview NW16). In Wales, in contrast, participants placed greater importance on inter-personal dynamics, partly due to long history of personal relations but also due to the perceived closeness of Wales. Within case variations thereby suggested the greater prevalence of inter-personal ties in contexts where relations were deeply rooted and well-established. The more formal institutional partnership style of relationship substituted for less established practices of interaction.

The German fieldwork also offered some interview evidence to support the 'synergy' position. Transparency represents a key theme within German politics. Ascher Barnstone (2005, pp. 1–2) explains that the emphasis placed on transparency in Germany in political, societal, and architectural terms represented 'a weapon against the past'. The data examining transparency in the German context, much like the UK, is relatively limited but in recent years a range of legislation has been introduced, including the Federal Freedom of Information Act 2006 and the Open Data Act 2017, which required all agencies of the direct federal administration to proactively publish all data as open data (Group of States Against Corruption, 2020, p. 21). In addition, at the Länder and local level there have been far-reaching pieces of transparency-oriented legislation. For example, the Hamburg Transparency Act of 2012 has been characterised as a pioneering piece of legislation shifting the focus to more proactive forms of openness.

Likewise, in France, the linkage between transparency and the territorial dimension of trust is not proven. There appeared to be fewer examples of regional-level high trust, high transparency, or explicit trust-transparency synergy. Rather like in Wales, there was some evidence from interviews that transparency of the rules of the game is a key element for understanding functioning and trusting relationships (Interview AURA14). The prevalent

understandings of transparency in France were those of administrative modernisation, digital governance, and anti-corruption. At an inter-organisational level, the demand for enhanced transparency is not new. It was articulated in the state reform programmes of the 1980s, especially the transformations enacted by premier Rocard (1988-1991) and later consolidated by governments of the left and right (Chevallier, 1988). The themes of One Stop Shops, of public sector partnership contracts, of simplified 'global' budgets, and of tighter performance management regimes brought the French case somewhat closer to that observed in the UK and elsewhere (Cole, 2008).

In the synergy field, transparency is a pre-condition, or essential ingredient, for trust between actors and, more generally, for trust in the political system. The next section decouples the concepts of trust and transparency and considers the very different figure of 'blind faith'.

### **Blind faith**

The second ideal type presented in the matrix is characterised by high levels of trust but relatively low levels of transparency. This form of trust-transparency relationship is characterised as 'Blind Faith': despite low levels of transparency, an individual or organisation has high levels of trust in individuals, organisations, and relationships. This position lies in tension with the pluralistic liberal democracies that form part of this survey, though there are clear echoes in more authoritarian regimes such as China (He, Shi & Liu, 2020; Li, 2016). In the Chinese context of authoritarian resilience, the absence of transparency has a limited impact on levels of different forms of trust (Zhong, Liu & Christensen, 2022). In western liberal democracies, this form of trust can also be identified in the characterisation of contemporary populism, defined by 'post-truth' politics, 'alternative facts', and 'gullible trust' (Norris, 2022,



p. 223). In none of the three democratic countries did we find support for 'blind faith' as a generic phenomenon of deference to or obedience in national authorities, as opposed to receptiveness to populist political messages.

The 'blind faith' ideal type encompasses an important sub-category that can be labelled as confidential trust. This can be characterised as relationships that require high levels of confidentiality and are liable to be disrupted in the event of formal transparency. Such values of secrecy and privacy were described as key virtues within policy communities by Marsh and Rhodes (1992). While blind faith characterises relationships between leaders and followers, in the form of authoritarian regimes and populist movements; confidential trust is more suited for interpersonal and close institutional relationships in the meso-sphere, of the type considered here.

Consistent with this characterisation of 'confidential trust', interview evidence in all three countries supported the classic position that some relationships needed to be maintained as confidential, and that transparency would disrupt such relationships. Such sentiments were most strongly expressed in the two French regions (Bretagne and Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes). The dangers of excessive transparency emerged as a constant theme in the French interviews, to the extent that one interlocutor spoke of 'disruptive transparency' (Interview BRET 15), while another affirmed that '100% transparency serves no purpose and is counter-productive' (Interview AURA 10). In a slight variation, another emphasised the dangers of excessive transparency, arguing in favour of 'maintaining confidentiality around sensitive programmes' (Interview AURA 17). Another dimension emphasised in interviews was that calls for more openness fuel suspicion of the behaviour of politicians. The call for greater transparency has been mobilised as part of the agenda of populist parties and the increased prominence of cynical

mistrust, which Norris (2022, p. 231) argues can be equally damaging as ‘Blind Faith’ and habitual compliance.

For its part, German democracy is strongly influenced by rules of political accountability (a form of transparency) and a legal culture based on rules and legal norms. The ideal type of ‘Blind Faith’ would seemingly run counter to these fundamental traits of the German polity. On the other hand, the linked concept of ‘confidential trust’ held much more analytical purchase, especially within the social partnership (Business and Labour) communities. Confidentiality is a core principle of interactions within the intergovernmental networks that organise German politics. Within the nation-wide Stability Council, for example, negotiations on the Land and Federal budgets are confidential. Regional Ministers of finance have not only to explain the Land budget vis-à-vis their own parliament, but also, behind closed doors, in front of colleagues of the other Länder in the Stability Council. In this way, the Stability Council holds Länd governments accountable if they diverge from a solid budget policy. Tensions were observed between these various forms of transparency: notably, the political accountability to parliament becoming less influential than the administrative transparency fuelled by peer pressure to conform to key performance targets.

Finally, in the UK, fieldwork uncovered variations in the degree of transparency dependent on proximity to the centre of policy communities, but with continued recognition of the formal arrangements around accountability and openness. In Wales and North-West England, there was recognition by interviewees that it was quite likely that the general public and actors that were on the periphery of the policy-making process were likely to have a different perception to insiders. A voluntary sector stakeholder in Wales explained that ‘when you’re working closely with it (the Welsh Government) day-to-day perhaps there’s a level of transparency

that's not there for most of the people' (Interview WAL06). The variation in degrees of transparency in our observed cases was driven by a range of contextual factors, including the varying effectiveness of formal reporting mechanisms, the relative weakness of media scrutiny (a recurring theme in debates in Wales), and a recognition that some discussions needed to remain confidential in order to resolve 'the tricky stuff' (Interview NW16).

From the fieldwork, 'confidential trust' appears to be contextually mediated. This traditional position remains vibrant in the German cases, though less so in the French regions and UK devolved entities – where the institutional design emphasises openness. To a degree, confidential trust remains an important vector of group dynamics. It retains an aspirational quality in certain associations, professional orders, and businesses, though it is also the most challenged by the temporal shift over the past three decades or so.

### **Negligible or counter-productive effects**

The lower left-hand side of the quadrant refers to Low Trust, High Transparency, which is labelled 'Negligible or Counter-Productive Effects'. In this ideal type, high levels of transparency either cause, or at least fail to address, relatively high levels of distrust or mistrust. In terms of decision-making, the process may be open and deliberative but this either contributes to or fails to reverse negative perceptions of an individual or organisation as incompetent, uncaring or dishonest. If individuals or organisations have high levels of extant distrusting relations, it is possible that continuous interaction may exacerbate these problems and lead to a 'spiral of mistrust' (Sydow, 1998, p. 38). Similarly, in this third ideal type, high levels of transparency in terms of policy content and outcomes either exacerbate or fail to address negative perceptions of an individual or organisation. There are contingent factors that

may be at play in these dimensions: for example, the information provided in relation to policy outcomes may be negative, painting a picture of programmatic policy failure (Bovens & 'T Hart, 2016) or individuals or organisations may be suffering from information overload. Therefore, in this quadrant, transparency potentially contributes to the pervasive sense of mistrust in politics and fuels the gap between politicians and public opinion.

The rise of transparency as a distinct part of the political agenda has elements in common in the three cases, often founded upon mistrust. In France, the demand for transparency was a synonym for the anti-corruption drive in the scandals related to party funding and personal enrichment in the 1980s and 1990s (Cole, 2017). The prevalent framing has centred on the rise of transparency as a form of anti – corruption, best represented by the creation of the Financial Public Prosecutor in 2013 and the then Socialist government's laws regulating conflicts of interest. Transparency as a means of combatting conflicts of interest was the most recurrent theme in the French interviews. In a 2016 nationwide YouGov survey, moreover, there was a near convergence across region, gender, party identification, and generation in relation to demanding tighter controls of conflict-of-interest practices (Cole et al., 2018).

In many senses, this position reflects established lines of enquiry within academic research. For example, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2001) argue that the more members of the public know about Congress, the less they tend to trust it. As an illustration of the potentially negative effect of transparency on trust, surveys show that public trust in government has not increased due to the introduction of freedom of information (FOI) laws in Anglo-American democracies. There is ample evidence to support the transparency breeds mistrust or distrust argument in the case of Germany, France, and the UK. In each country, transparency has risen up the political agenda because external shocks, scandals, accidents, and misuse of resources are propagating

demand within the media for more openness. In Germany, scandals such as that of Stuttgart 21 (Brettschneider & Schuster, 2013), the Volkswagen emissions scandal, the expansion of Frankfurt/Main airport (Geis, 2005), the construction of the Elbe Philharmonic Concert Hall in Hamburg (Janser, 2015) and the building of the Berlin-Brandenburg airport have all fuelled public demands for more transparency and citizen participation. In the UK, the Grenfell Tower scandal of June 2017 (when a tower block blaze was made worse by external ‘cladding’) produced irresistible pressures for an overhaul of fire regulations and safety standards. In France, the reaction against party funding scandals and corruption in the 1980s produced a major law on party funding in 1990 and indirectly strengthened a negative framing pitting transparency against parties, leading to accusations of the ‘dictatorship of transparency’ (Pingeot, 2019). In a similar logic, Heald (2006, p. 36) contends that, unless it is seen to make a difference, ‘introducing or increasing transparency may have to damage rather than beneficial effects’. This sentiment about the damaging turn of ‘disruptive transparency’ voiced in one of the French interviews (BRET15) was echoed in both the UK and German fieldwork, highlighting that more transparency did not necessarily generate more trust, and could prove counterproductive.

There are also conflicting views on the link between transparency and privacy, a potential tension that has been played out across both academic and public debates on the topic. For example, Mitch Daniels (2019, former Governor of Indiana, observed that the reforms around transparency had left American Government better off at all levels but had also left government ‘less nimble, less talented and less effective’. Similarly, a review of privacy and transparency carried out for the UK Government in 2011 noted that:

“if citizens come to believe that an effect of the release of public data will be a significant

decrease in privacy, then the result will inevitably be a withdrawal of support and a reduction in the democratic legitimacy of the programme.” (O’Hara, 2011, p. 27)

In contrast, writing over ten years earlier, Brin (1998, p. 335) noted the benefits of openness and transparency for citizens and concluded that they are ‘not about eliminating privacy’ but holding to account those who would violate it. However, there is clearly a question of balance between privacy and transparency: if transparency is perceived as eroding privacy too much, it’s effectiveness and legitimacy may be diminished.

The potential counter-productive effects associated with this ideal type reflect the arguments developed by ‘transparency pessimists’, who question the linkage between trust and transparency and argue that the latter might undermine the former. Etzioni (2014), for example, argues that transparency is ‘vastly oversold’ due to a naïve assumption that voters are deeply engaged with government policy and performance. Similarly, O’Neill (2002, p. 81) contends that transparency ‘mandates disclosure or dissemination but does not require effective communication with any audience’ and therefore, somewhat unsurprisingly, individuals unable to understand the information communicated are unlikely to have any reasons to trust more.

### **Dual dysfunctionality (and double standards)**

The final ideal type provides a broadly negative picture, the other end of the synergy spectrum, where both trust and transparency are characterised as being at low levels, and therefore is characterised in the matrix as ‘dual dysfunctionality’.

There is some evidence to support this dysfunctional low-trust, low-transparency position in each of the countries. Such is the case for Germany, for example, especially at the level of parties and the rise of anti-elite populist movements (Alternative für Deutschland – AfD) in Saxony Anhalt, which have drawn part of their appeal from the belief that key decisions on migration were taken by Merkel alone, without the participation of the Land and local governments likely to be most affected. A lack of transparency undermined trust. The AfD's breakthrough and persistence have been partly explained by the weakening of trust in political institutions (Reinl & Constantin, 2021), although Weisskircher (2020, p. 620) notes that explaining the rise of populism in Germany is a multifaceted affair, and therefore reducing the rise of AfD to short-term factors or a momentary decline in political trust is problematic. Other examples might include the 'boundary spanning' positioning of German politicians as representatives of varied local and national interests, which might be criticised on grounds of transparency as, more generally, the practice of maintaining distinct alliances at the sub-national and national levels.

In France, 'dual dysfunctionality' reflected well the echoes from within local and regional policy communities about the circulation of information and the (unintended) consequences of complexity. Examples drawn from fieldwork exemplify how territorial trust, distrust, and mistrust are in part a function of complexity and interdependency. In practice, new forms of interdependent relations failed against basic benchmarks of transparency, an argument best illustrated in the case of Auvergne Rhône-Alpes. The following provides a precise example of how poor transparency contributes to mistrust or distrust within inter-personal and close institutional relations. The complexities of the 2015 New Territorial Organisation of the Republic law (NOTRe) left regional and metropolitan councillors interviewed bemused. Though the NOTRe law identifies the region as the lead authority in terms of economic

development, the Lyon metropolitan council has specific, legally based rights in terms of economic planning. It became apparent in interviews with the Auvergne- Rhône-Alpes region and the Lyon metropolitan council that both sides had to agree; otherwise, the Prefect decides, which they equally wanted to avoid. But relations were barely trusting; in the opinion of one specialist in the region, the Lyon metropolitan council held the upper hand and produced its own urban plan without formally consulting the region (Interview AURA 14). However, most councillors did not understand these complex manoeuvres, or were not aware of them: in the expression of one interviewee: ‘of 200 councillors in the Region, only 25 at best understand what’s going on’. (Interview AURA 14).

In the UK case, Jennings and Lodge (2019, p. 776) note that public disaffection and discontent with establishment politics that shaped the Brexit agenda had been steadily on the rise for several decades and were further fuelled by events such as the financial crisis and parliamentary expenses scandal of 2009. Although a degree of mistrust, characterised by a dynamic of vigilance, can be characterised as a positive feature of a democratic society, the general trend in the UK has been characterised to be one of a decline of trust and rise of distrust (Devine et al., 2021). These trends have been reflected in domestic surveys, such as the British Social Attitudes survey, but also international surveys, such as the Edelman Trust Barometer, Eurobarometer, and European Social Survey.

Low levels of political trust undermine the effectiveness and legitimacy of government action (Marien & Hooghe, 2011). In each of the above examples drawn from the three countries, low transparency contributed to a sense of mistrust among the public. A perceived lack of accountability (whether from ‘trickster’ politicians, from within complex public



administrations or driven by invisible external forces) damages the fabric of regular political trust, defined by Hooghe and Zmerli (2011, p. 3) as a ‘very thin form of trust’.

## **Discussion**

The primary objective of this article was to explore the dynamics between trust and transparency – the trust-transparency nexus – in a comparative context, by proposing the trust-transparency matrix as a research framework. What light does the matrix throw on the cases in the survey? The utility depends somewhat upon the level of analysis: broad-based generalisations about national levels are adequately captured by existing (quantitative) surveys, but insightful, sometimes counter-intuitive accounts were uncovered via interviews at the meso-level, the most relevant level for the matrix.

Table 2 links the matrix with credible causal mechanisms and identifies the factors that shape the relationships between trust and transparency.

The role of the trust-transparency matrix is to anchor positions in precise contexts with more general applicability. We understood these general positions as similar to Falleti and Lynch’s (2009, p. 1157) characterisation of causal mechanisms as: ‘relatively abstract portable concepts whose causal force is given by the contours of the environment in which they operate’. Causal mechanisms are context dependent; they are not universal and so abstract to make social meaning or situation irrelevant.

The first ideal type, synergy, is the optimal balance, but it also provides a very optimistic view, of the type that can be unchallenged and declaratory. In terms of interactions, the causal

mechanism is the trust – building loop of individual and close institutional interactions. As a general proposition, trust and transparency come together in the gold standard of sincerity, combining the three cardinal qualities of trust (benevolence, competence, integrity) and the three main dimensions of transparency (procedural [how steps are taken] substantive [how content is rendered open] and outcome-focussed [how performance is measured against criteria]). The Gold standard is an ideal that is not attained in a pure form in any of the selected cases. While synergy between trust and transparency is the optimal outcome (for organisations, individuals, and relationships), it has a declaratory value that is difficult to judge in the abstract. This type of interaction can, in theory at least, describe interactions at various levels of social reality, though it is designed here to apply to the meso-level.

**Table 2.** Mapping the relationship between trust and transparency.

Type	Casual mechanisms	Factors shaping the relationship between trust and transparency	Temporal direction
Synergy	Interpersonal or institutional closeness  Shared history of collaboration	Trust-building loop of individual and close institutional interactions  Sincerity: benevolence, honesty, and competence	Ideal type not rooted in time
Blind Faith	Confidentiality  Gullible or habitual compliance	Secrecy of behind closed doors interactions and club goods (close institutional and inter personal interactions, shared codes within communities)  Leadership and followership typical	Group logics on the defensive, undermined by ‘dictatorship of transparency’, and reconfigured by social and technological evolution.

		of some authoritarian regimes and populist movements (mass psychology)	
Negligible or Counter-productive effects	Trust-transparency misfit  Policy failure	Role of scandals and corruption as tipping points for public distrust ('light brought to bear'), especially in the built environment, transport, public infrastructure ('media induced mistrust')	Gathering pace (fast society and technological innovation).
Dual Dysfunctionality	Interpersonal or institutional distance  Double standards	Zero-sum interactions: interpersonal and close institutional relations embed mistrust.  Insincerity, dishonesty [e.g. over COVID-19] fake news.	Not specifically rooted in time but boosted by technology and social network bubbles.

The second ideal type, 'blind faith', appears to encompass at least two quite distinct forms of dynamics. Pure blind faith characterises relationships between leaders and followers, in the context of authoritarian regimes and populist movements; confidential trust is more suited for interpersonal and close institutional relationships in the mesosphere, of the type considered here. In terms of broad societal dynamics in the three countries, public opinion is increasingly sceptical of politics and politicians and transparency is used as one discursive strategy to call 'untrustworthy' governments to account. With respect to the empirical cases investigated in this article, the broader trend at the

meso-level is towards greater transparency: not only in terms of information (data is no longer as secretly guarded), but also in terms of the lessening value of confidentiality as a marker of trust.

The third quadrant of negligible or counterproductive dynamics is well attested in the literature. From the survey, of the factors that shape the relationship between transparency and various forms of trust, the role of scandals and corruption are highlighted as tipping points for public mistrust or distrust, through the mechanisms of 'light brought to bear', especially in the fields of the built environment, transport, public infrastructure, and 'media induced mistrust', aggravating the misfit between expectations and behaviour of individual politicians. While this dynamic can, in theory, affect various levels of social action, it is most pertinent in terms of explaining public disaffection with perceived incompetent governors and remote public policies.

The fourth position is labelled as dual dysfunctionality. The core mechanisms are those of interpersonal or institutional distance (zero-sum interactions at the inter-personal and close institutional levels) and double standards (especially on behalf of political elites). In terms of elite-mass dynamics, dual dysfunctionality is fuelled by insincerity, dishonesty, and fake news, boosted by technology and social network bubbles. A rise in distrust linked to, or partially fuelled by, low levels of transparency (dual dysfunctionality) has damaging consequences for the health of democratic societies. Insofar as meso-level policy communities are concerned, the fourth quadrant undermines the basic trust and confidence that underpins interactions.

In applying the Trust-Transparency matrix we can see a nuanced picture of the interplay between trust and transparency in all of our cases. Grimmelikhuijsen et al. (2013: 584) in their

cross-national analysis of trust and transparency in the Netherlands and South Korea observe that ‘national cultural values play a significant role in how people perceive and appreciate government transparency’. There are clear differentiating values and principles bridging the trust-transparency axis, which we frame below in terms of positive, negative, and hybrid transparency. The originality of the project is to admit the possibility that these trust and transparency mixes might vary as much within as across European states.

Turning to our national cases, Germany is formally bound into tight legal understandings of transparency as political accountability, mediated by the continuing importance of confidentiality as a negotiating norm. The country is moving towards more open data, with the mainly positive assumption that transparency will underpin trust. In the UK, the picture is blurred and territory-specific. While much writing on transparency originally referred to its administrative dimension, via performance management, these preoccupations were not central in the UK fieldwork in the devolved regions; positive transparency was framed in terms of common understanding of rules of the game and conditions for interaction; negative transparency concerned the light brought to bear on administrative malfunctioning, the political misuse of resources and sub-optimal relations with central government. France has demonstrated innovation in terms of transparency, freedom of information, and digital governance. But these measures barely affect the overarching framing of transparency in terms of conflict of interest, corruption, and administrative failure. Transparency is framed more negatively as unpicking the self-serving interests of elites and exposing corruption.

Empirical fieldwork suggests several core themes, over and beyond national and regional differences:

*Complexity reduces transparency.* In each region investigated, transparency of the rules of the game was a key element for understanding functioning relationships and therefore building trust.

*Historical settings matter in our sub-national territories.* In all three of our national cases, a comparison could be made between on the one hand, territories or regions with a strong history of institutional continuity or close interaction between government and civil society actors (Bretagne, Wales, and to a lesser extent Hesse), and on the other, territories or regions with a recent history and with variable levels of past cooperation at that scale (Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, Saxony Anhalt and North West England).

*Governance restructuring matters more.* Broadly, in those regions which had been subject to recent processes of territorial restructuring or reorganisation (Auvergne and Rhône- Alpes, Northwest England, Saxony Anhalt) it was more likely that trust would face specific challenges related to spatial tensions and the perceived lack of administrative transparency.

Finally, the six regions functioned within the broader context of socio-political conflicts (territorial tensions linked to migration in Germany, the impact of the ‘Yellow Vest’ movement in France, the divisive influence of Brexit in the UK), their detrimental impact on trust and an occasional link to questions of lack of transparency. However, these systemic level pressures had only a limited impact upon observed interactions in our interview panels.

## **Conclusion**

The article makes a significant contribution to studying and operationalising the trust-transparency nexus. Trust and transparency need to be qualified to be understood and captured in a meaningful sense by empirical research. Theoretically, an interpretive matrix is proposed that provides an operational link to exploring relationships between types of trust and transparency. Methodologically, an ideal-type interpretative approach is combined with the identification of credible context-specific causal mechanisms, which assist in identifying the factors that shape the relationships between trust and transparency and give a sense of the temporal direction of each position (in short, whether there has been change over time). Empirically, the research draws on almost 100 interviews in six regions to support our claims. The case is strengthened by its validation by the comparative method and the empirical exploration of trust-transparency dynamics in meso-level governance settings in three European states: UK, Germany, and France. All of this adds up to a significant achievement, based on a decade long empirical investigation.

The article has proposed a framework to make sense of closely observed empirical interactions in comparable regions in Europe, while simultaneously drawing broader theoretical conclusions. In this way, the paper is both conclusive (in terms of the case in hand) and exploratory, in terms of contributing to the wider discussions of the role of trust and transparency as factors of public management. The proposed framework can contribute to exploring areas of future research. For example, the framework might be applied to complex issues of digital trust and transparency (how trust can be endangered by Artificial Intelligence); or to evaluating trust and transparency as modes of public action in relation to fields such as public health or the environment.

There are, naturally, limitations to the study, which is best viewed as a framework to interpret qualitative empirical data collection, rather than a tool for testing quantifiable hypotheses (prevalent in studies of trust) or as a protocol for engaging in controlled experiments (popular in the sub-field of transparency studies). As the dynamics involved in the trust-transparency nexus are based on interaction, however, the matrix contributes to making sense of real-life empirical interactions. Following the interpretative tradition of Meijer et al. (2018), the trust-transparency matrix can have a general application but makes most sense in understanding ‘meso-level’ interactions: rather more than strict inter-personal exchanges, but rather less than system-wide diagnoses of the crisis of trust. It drills down to capture meso-level dynamics in a way that elucidates or complements the findings of aggregate and abstract surveys on trust or the controlled experimental settings of modern transparency studies, which both reconstruct individual and group levels. It is an appropriate tool for empirical data collection in specific places and situations. In their work on validity in qualitative research, Adcock and Collier (2001, p. 541) acknowledge that qualitative researchers ultimately rely on using their ‘knowledge of cases to assess alternative explanations’. Such contextspecific, long-term investment is a precondition for emergent comparative studies of trust and transparency.

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#### Data availability statement

Anonymised transcriptions of the UK interviews are available in the UK Data Archive, with the following reference: Building trust? Institutions and interactions of multi-level governance in the UK 2017-2018. [Data Collection]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Service. <https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-854048>.

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