There’s little comfort in the truth that trust in politicians and in institutions has always been low. This is particularly so when you acknowledge a further significant decline after the 2008 economic crash. In this briefing we pull together the available evidence to demonstrate that whilst that fall was universal across Europe, it was steeper in the countries that fared worse during the economic crisis. The income trust gap is also widest in countries with higher than average incomes. In other words, it’s the poorest in the richest countries who are least trusting of the politicians and institutions that govern over them.

This briefing exists to provide a snapshot of the academic literature in the arena of income and trust. It sits alongside a fresh analysis of a field study commissioned by the John Smith Centre of 1,400 UK adults’ attitudes towards politicians and our public services.

Here we report a marked change in levels of trust where people earn £30,000 or more per year. The majority of UK adults earn significantly less than that. We see the professional and management class far more likely to engage in political activity and we see those in skilled, manual or casual work more likely to consider politicians as “self-serving” and as “working in the interests of the rich and powerful”.

This is one of three briefings in our Trilogy of Trust. The other two focus on women and young people. Collectively these three groups represent those most exposed to the economic crisis that will follow COVID-19. How institutions, governments and elected officials respond to that crisis will affect their lives more than most. The degree to which they trust those people and institutions matters.

As incomes rise, so does trust in government and the belief that democracy is working well. The question that flows from that is what comes first? Do we need greater levels of trust before we can deliver equality? Or is closing the income gap the key to rising levels of trust?

We hope this briefing stimulates debate as to why trust is so low and what can be done about it.

You can access all three briefings and more detail on the work of the John Smith Centre at www.johnsmithcentre.com.

Kezia Dugdale
Director of the John Smith Centre
The John Smith Centre exists to:

• Make the positive case for politics and public service.

• Promote civilised debate across the United Kingdom and to defend representative democracy, rooted in high quality research.

• Support people with talent, but not the means, to access politics and public life.

We set out to fulfil this mission through a number of activities including:

• Academic and practical research
• Employability initiatives
• Events, conferences and discussion panels
• Internship and leadership programmes
• The John Smith Public Service Award

You can follow all our work and discover details of our forthcoming events by visiting our website: www.johnsmithcentre.com

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In January 2020, IPPR was commissioned to analyse the data and to provide a snapshot of other academic literature in the area. Specific thanks should go to Rachel Statham, Senior Research fellow.
**INTRODUCTION**

People on lower incomes tend to report lower levels of trust in politicians, and in government, than those on higher incomes. This is borne out in the UK (OECD 2019), the US (Rainie and Perrin 2019) and across Europe (Foster and Friedan 2017). The relationship between trust and socio-economic status has long been the subject of study and scrutiny by researchers across fields including government and political behaviour (see, for example, Marien and Hooghe 2011; Schoon and Cheng 2011; Norris and Inglehart 2019). This work has explored how access to education, income and/or the labour market affects political behaviour, participation, and political trust. It has also navigated how best to make sense of how socio-economic circumstances affect attitudes and behaviours. In political behaviour, literature, socio-economic background and educational attainment have been identified as key drivers of political participation and vote choice at various elections (see for examples Smith 2019; Jennings, Stoker and Twyman 2016).

IPPR’s 2013 Divided Democracy report found that people from C2DE social grades1 were more likely to feel that democracy in the United Kingdom did not address their interests well than people from ABC12 social grades. In 2018, the Hansard Society found that people in the highest social grade categories had higher levels of knowledge about politics, were more satisfied with the democratic system, and were more likely to feel that getting involved in politics was effective as compared to other social groups (Hansard Society 2018; Uberoi and Johnston 2019).

**WHY DOES POLITICAL TRUST MATTER?**

Concern about low levels of trust in politics and political institutions has long been expressed in terms of the threat it might pose to the stability of democratic systems (Marien and Hooghe 2011). Low levels of political trust have been linked to greater acceptance for law-breaking, or lower inclination to obey laws (Ibid). In turn, lower levels of trust in government might undermine the effectiveness of government, or its ability to implement legislation (Ibid). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, trust in government and governments’ effectiveness in setting and ensuring compliance with legislation has been thrust into the spotlight, with emergency legislation and restrictions transforming our societies and way of life during this period.

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1 C2DE social grades describe skilled, semi-skilled and un-skilled manual workers, state pensioners, the unemployed, and casual or lowest grade workers.

2 ABC1 social grades describe those that work in high-level or intermediate management, administrative or professional roles, or in supervisory, clerical and junior managerial, administrative or professional roles.
Academic literature has explored the relationship between income inequality and various measures of trust. Across countries, researchers have long observed that citizens of countries with higher average income report lower levels of trust in their governments, compared to lower income countries – perhaps as a result of the heightened expectations of government that come with greater economic development (Inglehart, 1977, 1989; Mansbridge, 1997). However, whether higher levels of trust breed greater equality, or greater equality breeds higher levels of trust, is the site of continued debate (see, for example, Bergh and Bjørnskov 2014). We also know that trust in people and levels of income inequality are strong independent predictors of political polarisation (Greychna 2015), and that low levels of trust in democracy and democratic institutions are also associated with lower levels of political participation (Uberoi and Johnston 2019). Across Europe, there has been a noted decline in trust in governments since 2009, but this decline has been more pronounced in countries that fared worst during the banking crash (Foster and Freidan 2017).

Lower level of trust among some social groups has been linked to lower level of political participation. The Hansard Society found in 2018 that respondents in the UK in professional and managerial occupations or supervisory roles (social grades AB and C1) were considerably more likely to participate in political activities than respondents in routine or semi-routine work (social grades C2 and DE).

**TABLE 1: SOCIAL GRADE CLASSIFICATIONS**

**WHAT DRIVES LOW TRUST AMONG PEOPLE ON LOWER INCOMES?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Grade Classification</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>High managerial, administrative or professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Intermediate managerial, administrative or professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Supervisory, clerical and junior managerial, administrative or professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>Skilled manual workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Semi and unskilled manual workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>State pensioners, casual or lowest grade workers, unemployed with state benefits only</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Schoon and Cheng found higher levels of political trust among individuals who have acquired greater socio-economic, educational and motivational resources over the course of their lifetime, as compared to those with fewer resources. Here, an individual’s class background, or their parents’ socio-economic status, plays a key role alongside access to education (Schoon and Cheng 2011). Research from Jennings, Stoker and Twyman (2018) found that people from C2DE social grades – who are likely to be on lower incomes – were more likely than other groups to see politicians as engaging in “self-serving behaviour and working in the interests of the rich and powerful”. People in ABC1 grades, by contrast, were more likely to see politicians as lacking technical skills, or the ability to tell the truth to the public about decisions (Ibid; Uberoi and Johnston 2019). It’s clear that the complex relationship between socio-economic status and political attitudes, trust, and participation is shaped by access to both educational and material resources. While an individual’s income is a useful measure, their socio-economic background – i.e. the resources they had access to growing up, or the level of education they have accessed, might be the drivers behind variance in attitudes or behaviours across income groups.

To understand the relationship between income and political trust, we must first understand which factors shape individual income. Researchers call this the funnel of causality (Simeon 1976), which is a means of making sense of how prior influences shape later outcomes. Research looking at trust in government across Europe has found that citizens’ position in the labour market – or their individual income – is a determinant of political trust. Citizens with higher levels of educational attainment, who are higher skilled workers, are found to be more trusting in government (Foster and Friedan 2017). We can expect that these dynamics can be captured by personal income, the variable explored in this briefing, which acts as a proxy.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) research has identified perceptions that “government is unreliable”, or that “there is a lack of social mobility in the UK” as the attitudes that serve as the strongest predictors of low levels of trust in the UK government (OECD 2019). We might expect that both of these factors are associated to some degree with personal income, given the increased likelihood of people on lower incomes to interact with government services or support, and to have direct experience of barriers to social mobility. The same research finds that people in the top 10% of the income distribution report the highest levels of trust of any income group across a variety of measures. Income trust gaps between the top 10% and bottom 20% of the income distribution are notably largest when it comes to trust in government and in politicians.
KEY FINDINGS

We have undertaken new analysis for this briefing of a 2019 survey commissioned by the John Smith Centre, of 1,424 people living in Scotland, Wales and England. We found statistically significant relationships between income and trust in politicians and in government within respondents surveyed. As income rises, so does trust in politicians, and trust in government.3

Looking across the personal income spectrum, we saw a marked increase in the proportion of respondents with personal incomes of £30,000 or more reporting high levels of trust in politicians. Respondents with personal incomes of £60,000 or more were three times more likely to report high levels of trust in politicians than those with personal incomes of £10-20,000.

Figure 1: People on lower incomes report lower levels of trust in politicians

% of respondents reporting high levels of trust in politicians, by personal income

We observed a similar pattern for levels of trust in UK government. Respondents with high personal incomes – of over £50,000 – were substantially more likely to report high levels of trust in government as compared to those on lower incomes. Fewer than 1 in 5 respondents with personal incomes of £10,000-£19,999 reported high levels of trust in government, as compared with almost 1 in 3 respondents with personal incomes of £50,000 or more.

3 Our income measure asks respondents about their gross individual income and is measured by £5,000 or £10,000 increments. Given the discussion above of the relationship between education or relative labour market position being a strong determinant of personal trust levels, individual income acts as an effective proxy.
When we asked respondents about their attitudes towards democracy, we found that respondents on higher incomes were substantially more likely to agree that democracy is working well in the UK than those on low-to-middle incomes. Those with a personal income between £50,000-£59,999 were twice as likely to think democracy is working well in the UK as compared to those whose personal income was between £10,000-£19,999.

Figure 3: People on lower incomes are less likely to agree that democracy is working well in the UK

% of respondents who agree democracy is working well in the UK
Respondents on higher incomes were also more likely to believe that politicians keep their promises. Fifty per cent of respondents with a personal income of £60,000 or more agreed that politicians keep the promises they make during election campaigns, compared to just 1 in 5 respondents with a personal income of £10,000-£19,999.

**Figure 4: People on higher incomes are more likely to think that politicians keep the promises they make during an election campaign**

% of respondents who think politicians keep the promises they make during an election campaign

This trend indicates a substantial political trust gap between those on above and below median incomes.

When asked about the levels of trust they place in key institutions, we observed a persistent trust gap between high income respondents and other groups. Those on high incomes – of £50,000 or more – reported substantially higher levels of trust in institutions. Trust gaps were most pronounced in the case of the courts and the police, where high-income respondents were substantially more likely to report high levels of trust. Respondents with personal incomes of £50,000 or more were also substantially more likely to report high levels of trust in their local council and local MP.

**Figure 5: Trust in political institutions by income**

% of respondents reporting high levels of trust, by personal income
When asked about key cultural institutions, this trust gap persists. Respondents with personal incomes of £30,000 or more were more likely to report high levels of trust in the BBC, print media and high street banks than those with incomes under £30,000. Notably, the most substantive gaps were observed in those with personal incomes of £50,000 or more, who were substantially more likely to report high levels of trust, suggesting those with high personal incomes are more trusting of key institutions.

**Figure 6: Trust in key institutions by income**

% of respondents reporting high levels of trust, by personal income
Finally, we looked at trust in institutions among low-income respondents (those who report a personal income under £20,000). We found the greatest proportion of low-income respondents reported high levels of trust in the police, followed by the courts and the BBC. At the opposite end of the spectrum were elected politicians, the print media, and the government of the UK – the institutions in which the lowest proportion of low-income respondents reported high levels of trust.

**Figure 7: Trust in institutions among low-income respondents**

% of respondents with personal income under £20,000 reporting high levels of trust

- Elected politicians
- Police
- Print media
- Courts
- Local councils
- High street banks
- BBC
- UK Government

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60%
CONCLUSIONS

Socio-economic status clearly plays an important role in shaping trust in politicians, government and institutions in the UK. Trust in politicians, and government, rises with income, and we find persistent trust gaps between respondents with high personal incomes (of £50,000 or more) and those on low or middle incomes.

Those on high incomes are substantially more likely to report high levels of trust in politicians and government: respondents with personal incomes of £60,000 or more were three times more likely to report high levels of trust in politicians than those with personal incomes of £10,000-£19,999. Fewer than 1 in 5 respondents with personal incomes of £10,000-£19,999 reported high levels of trust in government, as compared with almost 1 in 3 respondents with personal incomes of £50,000 or more.

Higher income respondents are also more likely to report high levels of trust in key institutions, including the BBC, high street banks, and the police. This might be indicative of political and cultural institutions that are more reflective of those with greater access to material and educational resources, and/or the perception that these institutions better reflect the needs or priorities of those with greater financial means and security. The institutions which low-income respondents are most likely to report high levels of trust in are the police, the courts and the BBC. By contrast, just 1 in 5 or fewer low-income respondents reported high levels of trust in elected politicians, print media, and government of the United Kingdom.

In making sense of the relationship between income and trust, it is important to note that the vast majority of people living in the UK have a personal income of under £30,000. Median personal income for UK Income Tax payers was £24,400 in 2017-18, but it is important to note that this does not include the 43% of UK adults who do not pay Income Tax, either because they are not in work or because their incomes are below the taxable income threshold (Joyce, Pope and Roantree 2019). While we see the most marked differences in attitudes among those with particularly high incomes, these high-income groups represent a small minority. In seeking to better understand the drivers of trust in politicians and political institutions, more research is needed to identify what contributes to lower trust levels among those on lower incomes, and those on high incomes.

4 This is the latest available UK Government data and refers to taxpayers only: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/percentile-points-for-total-income-before-and-after-tax-1992-to-2011
REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING


