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Data Visualization

Horseshoe Patterns: Visualizing Partisan Media Trust in Germany

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Abstract
A trusted media is crucial for a politically informed citizenry, yet media trust has become fragile in many Western countries. An underexplored aspect is the link between media (dis)trust and populism. The authors visualize media trust across news outlets and partisanship in Germany, for both mainstream and "alternative" news sources. For each source, average trust is grouped by partisanship and sorted from left to right, allowing within-source comparisons. The authors find an intriguing horseshoe pattern for mainstream media sources, for which voters of both populist left-wing and right-wing parties express lower levels of trust. The underlying distribution of individual responses reveals that voters of the right-wing populist party are especially likely to "not at all" trust the mainstream outlets that otherwise enjoy high levels of trust. The media trust gap between populist and centrist voters disappears for alternative sources, for which trust is generally low.

Keywords
media trust, media bias, populism, anti-elitism, political partisanship

The idea that democracy relies on a press that is trusted by and informs the citizenry has been around at least since de Tocqueville ([1835] 2000). Yet recent evidence suggests that media trust in Western democracies is fragile (Strömbäck et al. 2020). What is more, populist movements that pit "the people" against "elites" often target the mainstream media (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017), as exemplified by Donald Trump's trope of "the enemy of the people." Scholars have highlighted how populists push the idea of an immoral and manipulative media system (Schindler et al. 2018) and how they urge supporters to switch their attention to "alternative" news sources (Schulze 2020). Generally, media trust seems to be increasingly affected by a source's ideological closeness rather than signals of quality (Bauer and Clemm von Hohenberg 2020). Some previous work has documented the association of media (dis)trust with partisanship or populist attitudes (Fawzi 2019). But it has rarely been visualized in a way that allows a clear impression of how media trust is distributed across news outlets and partisanship.

Figure 1 plots average trust ratings for nine different news outlets active in Germany, by vote choice. Germany is an interesting case to study: it has a multiparty system with several centrist parties on one hand and the populist right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) as well as the left-wing Linke on the other hand. Although media trust in Germany is comparably high, mainstream outlets have

increasingly been tainted as the "lying press." Germany has also seen the emergence of "alternative," sometimes foreign-funded, media that peddle misinformation. In such a news ecosystem, illustrating media trust at the level of outlets can be particularly informative. Our data are from an online survey conducted in March 2019 with a quota sample ($n =$ 1,424) that is approximately representative of the German population in terms of age, gender, and place of residence.

Of the nine sources, seven are long-standing, mainstream outlets (further categorized into public broadcasters, dailies, weeklies, and tabloids) and two are recent "alternative" outlets. Outlets are ordered according to their average trustworthiness. For mainstream media sources, we find a "horseshoe" pattern: voters of both the left-wing populist and right-wing populist parties have lower levels of trust, although this trend is much stronger among voters of the right-wing AfD. Remarkably, the trust gap between AfD voters and voters of

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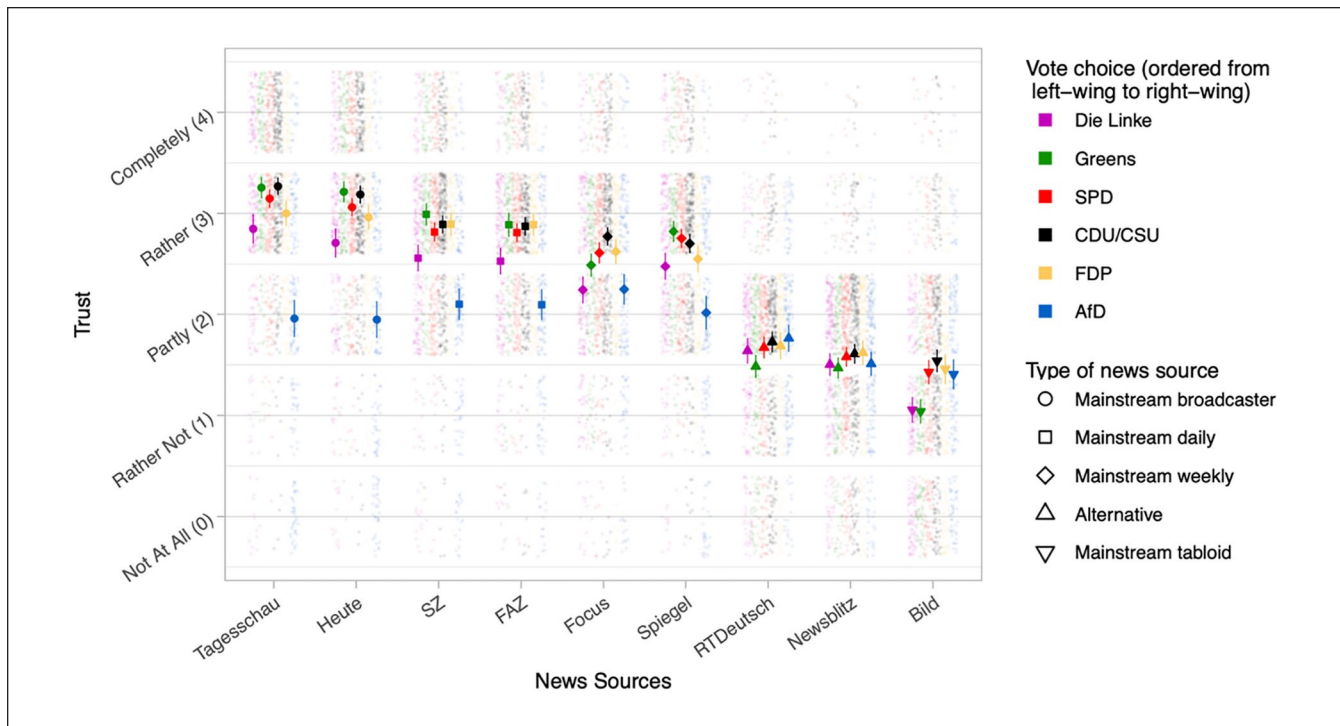Email: b.f.d.clemm@uva.nl

Figure 1. Media trust by news sources and partisanship.
Note: Symbols represent average trust levels, grouped by news sources and vote choice. News sources are sorted from most to least trustworthy and are categorized into five groups (mainstream public broadcaster, mainstream daily newspaper, mainstream weekly magazine, alternative source, and mainstream tabloid newspaper). Error bars depict 95 percent confidence intervals. Small semitransparent dots represent individual values, which we spread using a jitter function to provide a grasp of the underlying distributions. The media trust measure is "Do you think you can trust the following media?" with a fully labeled five-point scale ranging from "not at all" to "completely." The vote choice measure is "Which party have you (would you have) voted for with your main vote ('Zweitstimme')?" AfD = Alternative für Deutschland; CDU = Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands; CSU = Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern; FDP = Freie Demokratische Partei; SPD = Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands.

the more centrist parties is highest for the outlet that is most trusted in general (i.e., the public broadcaster Tagesschau (difference between AfD and Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands/Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern voters on a 5-point scale = 1.31, $F = 59.21$). The underlying distributions, illustrated by the semitransparent points, show that only among AfD voters, a substantial proportion trusts this source "not at all." For the alternative outlets, the trust gap between centrist and populist voters disappear. For example, AfD voters are slightly more trusting of the Russian-funded RT Deutsch, but this difference is negligible. Last, the widely circulated tabloid *Bild*, known for its often populist style, scores generally low, especially among voters of the most left-leaning parties.

Overall, the data support the idea that populist voters, especially on the right, harbor deep skepticism against mainstream sources. However, they do not "make up" for their lack of trust in mainstream sources by giving more credit to alternative sources in absolute levels, as perhaps some populist strategists would hope. Rather, populist voters show themselves distrustful of news sources in general. This is in line with recent work finding that general distrust is a common characteristic of populist voters (Rooduijn 2018).

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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