

From Shock to Disengagement: How Natural Disasters Reshape Politics in Low-Trust Democracies

Sandra León

sandra.leon@csic.es

Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas

Amuitz Garmendia Madariaga

Universidad Carlos III de Madrid

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Abstract

As natural disasters become increasingly frequent under climate change, understanding how they reshape politics has become more urgent. This paper theorizes and examines the political consequences of natural disasters in an increasingly prevalent context: advanced democracies with low levels of political trust. We argue that when political trust is already weak, disasters act as performance shocks that further erode political confidence and disrupt conventional mechanisms of democratic accountability. Rather than rallying around incumbents or shifting support toward mainstream opposition parties, citizens may disengage from representative institutions and develop stronger anti-political attitudes. Using the case of the October 2024 floods in Valencia, Spain, and drawing on observational, experimental, and panel data, we show that highly exposed residents exhibit significantly lower levels of political trust and stronger populist attitudes. Electorally, this dissatisfaction translates primarily into persistent electoral demobilization, alongside suggestive evidence of increased support for the radical-right party VOX in the most severely affected areas.

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I. INTRODUCTION

When a crisis occurs, whether in the form of a war (Mueller, 1970), a terrorist attack (Godefroidt, 2023) or a natural disaster (Fair et al., 2013; Boittin, Mo and Utych, 2020; Lazarev et al., 2014), public support for national leaders or institutions may temporarily increase. In a crisis scenario, citizens hold high expectations of public officials, expecting them to act swiftly and decisively to ensure their protection (Boin, Hart and Kuipers, 2018; Rosenthal, Boin and Comfort, 2001, 30), and this demand for swift and decisive action from decision-makers can lead to a *rally-around-the-flag* effect: a temporary increase in approval ratings for incumbents or governing bodies (Fair et al., 2013; Boittin, Mo and Utych, 2020; Lazarev et al., 2014). However, citizens may also penalize incumbents if they perceive government failures in responding to natural disasters (Fair et al., 2013), even when disasters are entirely exogenous to political action (Achen and Bartels, 2017).

Both electoral rewards and electoral punishments in response to disasters are typically expected only where state–citizen relations are based on a minimum level of trust. This assumption is straightforward for increased support for incumbents, but it also underpins electoral punishment: citizens must believe that replacing incumbents through alternation in power can lead to better crisis management. Yet when political trust is low, the standard mechanisms of democratic accountability may not operate effectively. What happens then when a crisis strikes in contexts where trust in government and representative institutions is already low? Faced with a collective sense of vulnerability, do citizens rally around incumbents, seek alternation by supporting the opposition, or instead turn to non-political actors to manage the crisis?

This paper analyzes the impact of a natural disaster on citizens' political attitudes in advanced democracies characterized by low levels of confidence in representative institutions.

As natural disasters become increasingly frequent under climate change ([Kreutzer, 2023](#)), understanding their political consequences grows more urgent. In addition, doing so in low-trust advanced democracies is particularly relevant. These cases are theoretically puzzling because strong state capacity that characterizes advanced democracies should help to mitigate the political costs of disasters, yet low levels of institutional trust may undermine citizens' willingness to credit governments for effective crisis responses, even when governments have the administrative and budgetary capacity to mobilize significant resources. Moreover, low political trust is no longer exceptional among advanced democracies. The United Kingdom, for instance, exhibits the lowest levels of trust in parliament, politicians and political parties among Western European countries¹. Distrust in political parties and national parliaments is widespread across EU member states, as well, particularly in countries such as France, Slovenia, Greece or Spain ([European Commission, 2024](#)). Under these conditions, natural disasters may impose particularly severe political costs on incumbent governments.

We are not the first to study the relationship between trust and natural disasters, as several studies have shown that disasters can undermine trust in representative institutions ([Frost et al., 2024](#); [Carlin, Love and Zechmeister, 2014b](#); [Olson and Gawronski, 2010](#); [Blankenship et al., 2021](#)). These studies examine changes in levels of political trust as one of the potential consequences of natural disasters. Yet to our knowledge, we are the first to focus specifically on political trust as the relevant pre-existing condition that shapes citizens' responses in the aftermath of the disaster.

In our argument, when pre-existing levels of political trust are low, natural disasters operate as performance shocks that can push already fragile political confidence past a tipping point. Rather than activating standard mechanisms of democratic accountability, disasters in these contexts may deepen disengagement from representative institutions, strengthen antipolitical attitudes and in turn encourage a shift in citizens' preferences away from political actors.

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We test this argument by examining the natural disaster caused by the floods that struck Spain on October 29, 2024, which resulted in 232 fatalities and extensive property damage in the Valencia region, amid widespread criticism of the regional government's crisis management. Spain offers an ideal case to test our theory due to its historically low levels of political trust ([Montero et al., 1998](#)), which became especially pronounced after the 2008 financial crisis ([Torcal and Christmann, 2020](#)) and have not recovered over the past decade.² We evaluate our theory using a field study conducted in the aftermath of the floods and repeated one year later. Crisis-exposure intensity-defined as the severity of the floods' impact on municipalities in the Valencia region-serves as our main treatment variable. We combine observational and experimental analyses to examine how crisis exposure affects individuals' political trust, their anti-political attitudes, support for non-political actors and their vote intentions.

Our results show that after the floods highly exposed residents exhibit significantly lower trust in political institutions – but not in non-political actors such as the military, security forces, or experts – and stronger populist and technocratic attitudes. A conjoint experiment on crisis management preferences reveals that citizens broadly favor crisis committees composed of institutional and technical actors over political representatives, yet this preference is uniform across crisis-exposure groups. Citizens, however, do not view grassroots societal actors – volunteers or NGOs – as substitutes for political management: societal committees are the least likely to be selected overall. Finally, as for electoral accountability, dissatisfaction channels primarily into persistent electoral demobilization in the most affected areas, with tentative and intensifying evidence of a limited shift toward the radical-right VOX, while the apparent punishment of the regional incumbent partly reflects pre-existing differences in PP support across exposure zones rather than a causal effect of the disaster itself.

Our paper makes four related contributions. First, we direct attention to a theoretically

²Currently, trust in the national government and parliament in Spain remains well below the EU average ([European Commission, 2024](#)).

important but neglected context: advanced democracies with low political trust. These cases are puzzling because high state capacity should attenuate the political costs of disasters, yet low trust may enhance them. Second, we develop a tipping-point argument to explain why standard accountability mechanisms might be distorted in these contexts: where baseline trust is already scarce, even a modest additional decline can push citizens past an individual threshold of disengagement, with dissatisfaction channeling into electoral demobilisation and a tentative shift toward radical alternatives rather than conventional electoral alternation. Third, while existing research has examined political trust as an outcome of disasters, we treat it as a precondition that shapes how citizens interpret performance shocks in the first place. Finally, we analyze attitudinal outcomes alongside electoral behavior. While the disaster literature has concentrated overwhelmingly on votes, we show that there are important attitudinal effects using an unusually rich empirical design for the study of natural disasters that combines observational analysis, a pre-registered conjoint experiment, and a panel subsample.

II. CITIZENS' RESPONSES TO NATURAL DISASTERS

In the study of the political consequences of natural disasters, scholars have disproportionately focused on citizens' electoral responses, although existing findings remain mixed. Some studies find evidence that voters punish incumbents for disaster damage even when the shock is clearly exogenous (Cole, Healy and Werker, 2012; Heersink, Peterson and Jenkins, 2017). Other work suggests that electoral punishment may be attenuated or even offset by visible governmental responses such as disaster declarations or relief policies (Gasper and Reeves, 2011; Bechtel and Hainmueller, 2011; Healy and Malhotra, 2009; Fair et al., 2013)³.

This literature on accountability dynamics after natural hazards fails to note that electoral

³Yet other studies find little evidence of electoral backlash following natural disasters. In some cases this is because responsibility attribution is diffuse or because citizens interpret disasters as events beyond political control (Abney and Hill, 1966; Remmer, 2014).

rewards and punishments both presuppose a minimum level of state–citizen trust. Even when citizens express discontent by punishing incumbents at the ballot box, a baseline level of trust towards opposition parties is necessary for them to believe that elections can deliver better crisis management through alternation. What happens when a crisis strikes in contexts where trust in government and representative institutions is low? In these contexts, a rally-around-the-flag effect may not materialize, and citizens may lack confidence not only in incumbents but also in opposition parties.

This question is particularly relevant in the context of advanced democracies that are experiencing pockets of low trust ([Peeters and Dussauge Laguna, 2021](#)). These cases present a paradoxical scenario when it comes to understand the political effects of natural disasters. On the one hand, richer countries are less likely to have severe disasters (?) at the same time they have more capacity to curb their effects. Fiscal resources and professional bureaucracies make these states better equipped to respond to the consequences of catastrophes and to implement effective post-crisis recovery policies. On the other hand, low levels of trust may make them less successful in preventing citizens' dissatisfaction. Even when states implement relief policies, distrust in representative institutions may lead citizens to interpret these government responses as incompetent or self-serving ([Hetherington, 2005](#)). Low-trust contexts may also make it more difficult to secure citizens' cooperation and compliance with authorities ([Levi, 1988](#)), which may slow recovery efforts and undermine the effectiveness of post-disaster policies. In these contexts, the political consequences of a natural disaster that is perceived to be mismanaged may become particularly severe.

By focusing on low-trust contextual conditions, our approach speaks to a broader literature that examines how pre-existing institutional and political factors shape the heterogeneous political consequences of natural hazards. This body of work includes early contributions such as [Abney and Hill \(1966\)](#), who suggested that citizens' pre-crisis attitudes toward officials

influence the extent to which they assign blame to representatives.⁴ Similarly, [Carlin, Love and Zechmeister \(2014a\)](#) argue that individuals' prior attitudes toward democratic legitimacy can serve as a protective buffer when disasters occur, allowing democracies to absorb temporary shocks.⁵ We contribute to this literature by focusing on political trust as a key precondition.

In sum, much of the existing literature has focused on the role of post-disaster relief policies in shaping citizens' reactions, seeking to disentangle whether voters irrationally blame incumbents for exogenous shocks or instead respond to the effectiveness of government efforts to mitigate their consequences. Yet this literature has paid comparatively little attention to the political preconditions that shape how citizens interpret government responses in the first place. We address this gap by developing a theoretical argument about how low political trust conditions citizens' reactions to natural disasters and their aftermath.

III. THE ARGUMENT

Natural disasters function as performance shocks that test the state's ability to protect citizens and manage crisis response. Because political trust in representative institutions is highly performance-dependent, these shocks primarily undermine individuals' confidence in elected actors rather than in institutional actors or society more broadly. Where baseline political trust is already low, we expect disasters to push trust past an individual tipping point, prompting citizens to develop stronger anti-political attitudes and exit from representative institutions-by abstaining, withdrawing support from all established parties or punishing incumbents and opposition alike. Rather than reallocating support within the party system, citizens may shift their reliance toward non-political actors, such as technocrats, experts, and other non-elected

⁴They conclude that pre-existing positive attitudes toward the mayor and the office of mayor in the city of New Orleans shielded the local government from electoral backlash following the 1965 Hurricane Betsy. Citizens interpreted the government's post-disaster relief actions more favorably, suggesting that perceptions of local response are endogenous to prior attitudes toward state officials.

⁵Other preconditions examined in this literature include citizens' expectations of federal government action ([Heersink, Peterson and Jenkins, 2017](#)), ethnic and political divisions (?), and regime stability and corruption ([Ahlerup, 2013](#); [Akarca and Tansel, 2016](#)).

institutional or societal actors, whom they perceive as more trustworthy.

Next we unpack the argument introduced above in three steps. First, we outline how political trust relates to other forms of trust. Second, we discuss how disasters test government performance and erode political trust. Third, we explain how pre-existing levels of trust condition citizens' reactions in high-capacity, low-trust contexts.

First, trust traditionally encompass three different dimensions (Uslaner, 2018). One is particularized trust: trust among people who are like us (based on ethnicity or religion, for instance) or whom we know (also called "personalized trust"). The second dimension consists of social trust (or "generalized trust"), defined as the belief that people we do not personally know are trustworthy (Herreros, 2023). The third dimension is political trust, which can be divided into trust in implementing institutions (such as the police, legal system, and bureaucrats), which generally enjoy a broader base of support than political actors because they are seen as impartial (Newton, Stolle and Zmerli, 2018; Newton and Norris, 2000) and trust in representative institutions (such as government actors and parliaments), which is more contingent on governments' performance. The relationship between different dimensions of social trust is highly debated in the literature (Uslaner, 2018)⁶, but there is certain agreement that both social and personalized trust are more resilient forms of trust, while political trust (defined here as trust in representative institutions) is the most fragile dimension (Levi and Stoker, 2000). Broader comparative work on political trust also finds that political trust depends on perceived performance (Stoyan et al., 2016; Reinhardt, 2015, 2019; Newton, Stolle and Zmerli, 2018)⁷

Second, because disasters act as performance shocks, they directly target the most performance-dependence dimension of trust-trust in representative institutions. Disasters can

⁶Some authors find that social trust and trust in implementing institutions are highly correlated (Rothstein and Stolle, 2008), whereas others argue that they are independent dimensions.

⁷These findings challenge socio-cultural theories of political trust, which emphasize its exogenous roots in early-life and adult socialization processes (Oskarsson, 2010).

drastically reduce citizens' standards of living and lead to a loss of confidence in the state and its authority (Carlin, Love and Zechmeister, 2014b). This is not only due to the material hardship that natural hazards can cause to people but also because disasters represent "special times". This means that during crises citizens expect governments to act with exceptional diligence (Olson and Gawronski, 2010, p. 208)(Boin, Hart and Kuipers, 2018, p. 30) and they evaluate closely political authorities' ability to provide services and ensure security (Stoyan et al., 2016; Newton, Stolle and Zmerli, 2018). Empirical evidence shows that as victims face urgent needs-such as food, water and safety, government failure to respond effectively may decrease political trust (Frost et al., 2024; Carlin, Love and Zechmeister, 2014b; Olson and Gawronski, 2010), potentially undermining regime legitimacy (Olson and Gawronski, 2010) and even provoking conflict.⁸.

Third, given the conditions set above - the different dimensions of trust and the impact of crises on political trust - we expect citizens' reactions to natural disasters to depend on baseline levels of political trust. We argue that baseline trust will shape both the resilience of political trust to the shock and how citizens perceive government performance during the crisis.

When a natural disaster hits in a context with already low levels of political trust, governments are worse equipped to withstand the negative political effects of disasters. This happens because trust functions as a form of political capital that shields incumbents from punishment for the drop in well-being caused by the crisis. In low-trust contexts, there is little buffer: political trust is already scarce, so even small additional declines can make citizens disengage from representative institutions altogether. Moreover, public perceptions of government effectiveness are negatively biased. Trust is an enabling condition (Hetherington, 2005), so even where capacity is high and governments try their best to manage the crisis, low trust makes people less confident in the ability of governments to do "the job well enough

⁸? shows that scarcities of water and food during disasters can breed frustration and violence, particularly in developing countries.

or fairly enough” (*ibid.*, p. 5). Citizens are therefore less predisposed to evaluate disaster management positively.

This dynamic reflects a tipping point beyond which citizens disengage from representative institutions altogether.⁹¹⁰ When political trust erodes, other dimensions of trust -institutional, social and personalized -remain relatively stable. This is consistent with evidence that personalized and social forms of trust are highly stable and that implementing institutions (e.g., the police, civil service, and legal system) have seen stable or even rising public support even when representative institutions have experienced a decline (Valgarðsson et al., 2025). As political trust collapses, citizens may anchor their confidence in implementing institutions and society more broadly.

Political distrust may lead citizens to develop stronger anti-political attitudes, as low levels of political confidence are associated with populist values and support for populist parties (Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel, 2018; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Distrust in political representatives may also increase citizens’ willingness to seek alternative sources of authority or legitimacy, such as non-political institutional or societal actors (Bertsou and Caramani, 2022). Our approach builds on recent research showing how short-term economic shocks can activate or intensify populist attitudes (Rico and Anduiza, 2019; Margalit, 2019), extending this perspective to the relatively understudied role of natural hazards in shaping populist values.

Overall, we do not expect citizens’ reactions to follow the pattern predicted by electoral accountability models (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014)-namely, punishing incumbent leaders while increasing support for opposition parties. As political distrust and antipolitical attitudes

⁹In low-trust contexts, political trust may become less responsive to performance due to floor effects, but small increases in distrust could still reach a critical breaking point.

¹⁰Unlike other tipping models in which changes in individuals’ behaviour depend on how many other individuals have already acted (Granovetter, 1978; Kuran, 1995), in our model each individual has an internal threshold, and when trust falls below that threshold, her behavior changes independently of how others behave. The collective outcome arises because many individuals cross their threshold at roughly the same time.

extend, opposition parties will be also unable to withstand public criticism¹¹. The rejection of representative institutions may thus lead to other forms of electoral behavior, such as punishment to all established political parties, increased abstention or support for new populist political forces.

i. Hypotheses

The theoretical argument developed above generates four empirical expectations. The first two concern attitudinal responses to the disaster: erosion of trust in political actors and the strengthening of anti-political attitudes. The third examines preferences for crisis management, and the fourth addresses electoral behavior.

H1: In areas more severely affected by the disaster, levels of trust in political actors will be lower compared to non-directly affected areas¹².

Increasing distrust of political authorities due to the disaster will be associated with stronger anti-political attitudes, meaning higher support for populist ideas, the role of technocrats in decision-making and anti-political sentiment more broadly.

H2: In areas more severely affected by the disaster, individuals will exhibit higher levels of anti-political attitudes compared to those in non-directly affected areas¹³.

H3: In areas more severely affected by the disaster, individuals will exhibit a stronger preference for non-political authorities in crisis management compared to those in non-directly affected areas¹⁴.

¹¹This was, in fact, the electoral scenario in the 2008 financial crisis in several Southern European countries (Ruiz-Rufino and Alonso, 2017). In South European countries political trust dropped significantly after the 2008 financial crisis, and citizens' criticism of incumbent governments' implementation of budgetary cuts did not translate into increased support for traditional opposition parties. Voters turned away from mainstream political parties altogether, creating a vacuum on the supply side of the party system. In Spain, this vacuum paved the way for the emergence of new political parties that capitalized on widespread distrust toward the established political class (Vidal, 2018).

¹²PRE-REGISTERED

¹³PRE-REGISTERED

¹⁴PRE-REGISTERED

Finally, the rejection of representative institutions may lead individuals who have been affected by the disaster to distorted forms of accountability, such as punishment of all established political parties, increased abstention, or support for newer political forces:

H4: In areas more severely affected by the disaster, political disaffection will not translate into electoral alternation. Instead, individuals will be more likely to abstain, reject mainstream political parties, or shift support toward newer political forces, compared to those in non-directly affected areas¹⁵.

IV. CASE STUDY: 2024 FLOODS IN SPAIN

We test our theory using the natural disaster caused by the floods of October 29, 2024, in Spain, which particularly affected the Valencia region. This case is especially well suited for two related reasons: it creates the conditions under which political consequences should be observable, and it presents the specific context in which our theorized mechanism should operate.

First, the scale of the disaster is sufficient to generate meaningful political consequences. These floods constitute one of the most severe natural disasters recorded in Western Europe in the twenty-first century. According to EM-DAT, the event caused 232 deaths and approximately \$11 billion in damages, placing it at the 97th percentile of all flood events globally between 2000 and 2026 in terms of fatalities, and at the 99th percentile in terms of economic losses.¹⁶ Within Western Europe specifically, the DANA was the deadliest flood in over two decades,

¹⁵This hypothesis was not pre-registered. Our pre-registration focused on attitudinal outcomes; although vote intention was included in the survey, electoral behavior was not part of the pre-registered design. Nevertheless, H4 derives directly from the theoretical argument: in low-trust contexts, eroded confidence in representative institutions should depress electoral participation and foreclose alternation as a credible response. This prediction is also consistent with the empirical record of Southern European democracies following the 2008 financial crisis, where widespread distrust similarly failed to translate into support for mainstream opposition parties (Ruiz-Rufino and Alonso, 2017; Vidal, 2018).

¹⁶EM-DAT (Emergency Events Database) is maintained by the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) at the University of Louvain, Belgium, and is the primary global repository for data on natural and technological disasters from 1900 to the present. See <https://www.emdat.be>.

marginally surpassing the 2021 Ahr Valley floods in Germany (226 deaths). To put these figures in perspective, the median flood event globally kills 12 people, yet the DANA killed nearly twenty times that number. Beyond the immediate death toll, the disaster's human footprint was vast: according to the *Informe de Diagnóstico del Plan de Recuperación Económica y Social de la Comunitat Valenciana*, published by the Generalitat Valenciana in March 2025, over 306,000 people across 103 municipalities were directly affected, a figure independently corroborated by the Instituto Valenciano de Investigaciones Económicas (Ivie) using Copernicus satellite imagery.¹⁷

Second, this was a natural disaster in which public opinion strongly criticized the mismanagement of political authorities, which makes political consequences not only likely but severe. The crisis generated widespread criticism of the regional governments' handling of the emergency. Just ten days after the disaster, on November 9, 2024, an estimated 130,000 people demonstrated in Valencia - the largest protest in the city since the 2003 anti-Iraq War march - demanding the resignation of regional president Carlos Mazón¹⁸. Survey data collected in the aftermath of the disaster also showed that 88.6% of Valencians identified Mazón as the least effective leader during the crisis, 87% rated the regional government's performance as ineffective or very ineffective¹⁹.

Moreover, the division of responsibilities between the central and regional level of government in disaster management²⁰ complicates the attribution of responsibility, potentially attenuating the accountability mechanism and in turn the political consequences of a

¹⁷*Informe de Diagnóstico del Plan de Recuperación Económica y Social de la Comunitat Valenciana*, Generalitat Valenciana, March 2025; corroborated by Instituto Valenciano de Investigaciones Económicas ([Instituto Valenciano de Investigaciones Económicas \(Ivie\)](#), 2024), based on Copernicus Emergency Management Service satellite imagery.

¹⁸According to official figures provided by the Government Delegation in the Valencian Community.

¹⁹Yet criticism was not confined to the regional level: 75.3% of the general population and 76.9% of the regional residents perceived the central government as ineffective in handling the crisis ([El País](#), 2024).

²⁰According to the Spanish Constitution, regional governments are responsible for the ordinary management of emergencies within their territory and each autonomous community has its own Territorial Emergency Plan, which regulates response actions in the event of disasters. The central government manages emergencies that exceed regional capacities or affect multiple communities, mobilizes state resources, declares emergency states if needed, and provides financial and logistical support to affected regions

mismanaged natural disaster.

Finally, the accountability mechanism is further distorted by the low political trust that characterizes Spanish public opinion. Since the late 1970s and until the mid 2010s, Spain's political culture remained relatively stable, characterized by a high level of support for democracy, indicating its legitimacy. However, public satisfaction with the functioning of democracy has fluctuated over time, acting as a thermometer of political discontent, with variations depending on the perceived effectiveness of the system (Montero et al., 1998). A general support for democracy has coexisted with a consistently low level of political trust, reflecting a sense of disaffection among the population that became particularly acute after the financial crisis of 2008 (Torcal and Christmann, 2020), a crisis that had particularly dramatic economic consequences for the Southern European countries (Ruiz-Rufino, 2024). Although macroeconomic indicators began to recover in the second half of the 2010s, levels of political trust have not returned to pre-2008 levels (Kołczyńska et al., 2024). Comparatively, at present, trust in the national government and national parliament in Spain remains well below the EU average (European Commission, 2024).

V. DATA

To test our theoretical expectations, we leverage variation in the intensity of the natural disaster across municipalities in the Valencia region. We conduct a survey across three areas (500 observations in each area) that differ systematically in their degree of exposure to the disaster, using crisis intensity as our main explanatory variable.

- **High exposure group (HE):** residents in municipalities most severely affected by the DANA, which were included in the aid packages approved by the *Consell de Govern* (the

regional executive)²¹.

- **Medium exposure group (ME):** residents in municipalities located within the Valencia province that were not severely affected by the DANA²².
- **Low exposure group (LE):** residents in municipalities outside of the Valencia province (within the Valencia region), where the crisis is known but has had little direct impact.

We describe the three groups in terms of high, medium, and low exposure since all respondents were exposed to the disaster in some form: those in the most affected areas bore its direct personal and material costs, while those in non-directly affected areas were nonetheless exposed to the crisis through intense media coverage, the national political debate and arguably through direct or indirect personal connections with affected people. As exposure was high and widespread across the Valencian Community, variation between groups is limited, likely yielding conservative estimates of the true effects. Moreover, both central and regional government economic assistance had already been announced when the survey was conducted, which could have moderated citizens' dissatisfaction with authorities, making it less likely to find significant effects. Therefore, our empirical analysis constitutes a hard test of our theoretical expectations.

Figure 1 shows municipalities that were part of the survey (with different color depending on the exposure to the crises) and the areas most affected by the floods. Table 1 shows that the three survey groups—each varying in their degree of exposure to the crisis—correspondingly differ in how the crisis has affected the mental health, physical health, and occupational status of individuals.

Data collection began on December 10, 2024²³. One year later, we fielded a follow-up

²¹We sampled participants from 48 of the 75 municipalities officially designated as *zona cero* in the province of Valencia, encompassing 80% of the 219 recorded deaths from the disaster in the area.

²²For areas with intermediate exposure, we do not have clear expectations, as the effects of this level of crisis intensity on trust and preferences for crisis management are uncertain. It is unclear whether their responses will follow the pattern seen in the most affected areas or align more closely with those of the least affected group.

²³The survey was conducted by a leading survey firm between December 10, 2024 and January 8, 2025.

Figure 1: Municipalities by crisis exposure and flood impact (red dots: HE areas; blue dots: ME areas; grey dots: LE areas)

Table 1: Impact of the DANA natural disaster in Mental Health, Physical Health, and Employment Status by Treatment Group (Column Percentages)

Category	HE	ME	LE
Mental Health			
Nothing	11.85	21.93	35.48
Somewhat	37.55	45.88	39.11
Quite a bit	33.33	22.94	19.56
A lot	17.27	9.26	5.85
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00
Physical Health			
Nothing	50.00	73.19	86.59
Somewhat	27.31	20.16	9.35
Quite a bit	15.86	5.65	2.44
A lot	6.83	1.01	1.63
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00
Employment Status			
Nothing	54.44	67.87	84.48
Somewhat	23.39	20.08	11.69
Quite a bit	12.50	9.44	2.02
A lot	9.68	2.61	1.81
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00

survey. The composition of the sample by area and survey wave is reported in the Appendix A1. Our hypotheses, however, are formulated with respect to the cross-sectional variation captured in the first wave of the survey, conducted shortly after the disaster. Whether the effects observed in the most affected areas persist, attenuate, or deepen one year later - as measured in the second wave - is an open empirical question that we do not theorize about *ex ante*.

Moreover, a potential concern with our design is that the three groups may differ not only in their exposure to the disaster but also in pre-existing characteristics that independently shape citizens' political attitudes and electoral behavior. For instance, political trust or populist attitudes in flood-prone, socioeconomically vulnerable areas may have been lower even before

the floods occurred. Similarly, smaller municipalities may exhibit structurally distinct electoral patterns - including different rates of abstention that could confound the relationship between crisis exposure and political demobilization. Appendix A2.1 shows that the three groups are largely balanced on individual sociodemographic and electoral characteristics, with the exception of municipal PP vote share in the 2023 local elections, which was significantly lower in High Exposure municipalities (31.8%) than in Low Exposure ones (39.4%). By contrast, municipal VOX vote share is virtually identical across exposure groups, providing no evidence of pre-existing populist leanings in most affected areas. Municipal registered unemployment (as a share of total population) were, if anything, slightly lower in High Exposure municipalities (6.0%) than in Low Exposure ones (6.6%), ruling out pre-existing economic vulnerability as a confounding factor. We address these concerns through a series of robustness checks reported alongside the main results below.

Finally, to complement our group-based measure of crisis exposure, we also use an alternative operationalization based on the geodesic distance between each respondent's municipality and the nearest flooded area. Flood impact data were obtained from the regional government (*Generalitat Valenciana*), through the Valencian Agency on Security and Emergency Response (*Agència Valenciana de Seguretat i Resposta a les Emergències (AVSRE)*)([Institut Cartogràfic Valencià \(ICV\), 2024](#)).²⁴ and compute the distance between each postal code centroid and the flood footprint using QGIS, an open-source Geographic Information System (GIS). Appendix A2.2 reports the distance of these municipalities to the nearest flooded area as computed using QGIS, the relationship between crisis intensity measured as HE, ME and LE groups and crisis intensity measured as distance to the flooded areas and a map of the calculated distance between the municipalities included in the sample and the nearest flooded areas.

²⁴The dataset corresponds to the flood footprint associated with the 2024 DANA event and represents the maximum spatial extent of observed inundation during the episode. This footprint is constructed through the integration of multiple information sources, including field reports from emergency services, georeferenced damage assessments, and technical inputs from territorial and civil protection authorities.

VI. RESULTS

We present the results in four steps. First, we examine trust in political actors (H1). Second, we analyze anti-political attitudes (H2). Third, we examine citizens' preferences for crisis management using a conjoint experiment (H3). Finally, we turn to electoral behavior in affected areas (H4).

i. Trust in political and non-political actors

Survey participants were asked in both waves to evaluate their level of trust (using a 0-10 scale) in different institutions: political (local government, regional government, central government and the European Union), institutional (the army, the state security forces and the monarchy) and societal (volunteers, NGOs and experts). Descriptive data in Appendix A3 shows that, in general, personalized trust (trust in friends and family) and social trust (trust in volunteers, neighbors, and people more generally) are the most highly rated, followed by trust in implementing institutions (army, state security forces). Trust in political actors (local governments, EU, central and regional government) is the least regarded form of trust.

We then regress trust in each political actor on exposure to the disaster²⁵ to test H1. Results in [Figure 2](#) show that despite the overall low levels of political trust, significant differences (with a 95% confidence interval) emerge between the highly exposed group and the low exposed group, supporting H1.

The effects are most pronounced for trust in the regional government, where highly exposed individuals score approximately 0.67 points lower than the low exposed group in wave 1 — equivalent to 0.29 standard deviations — a substantively meaningful difference given that

²⁵All regressions include as control variables gender, age, education and ideology, and standard errors are clustered at the municipality level to account for the fact that crisis exposure varies at the municipal rather than the individual level.

mean trust in the regional government barely exceeds 1.5 on a 0-10 scale. This effect attenuates but remains statistically significant in wave 2, suggesting a degree of persistence one year after the disaster. Trust in the central government follows a similar pattern: highly exposed individuals score approximately 0.43 points lower than the low exposed group in wave 1, though this difference loses statistical significance by wave 2²⁶. Trust in local government, by contrast, does not differ significantly across exposure groups in either wave²⁷. To further validate our findings, Appendix A4.1 replicates the main results on trust in political actors using distance to the flooded areas as an alternative measure of exposure.

An important caveat about these results is that we cannot rule out they reflect a pre-existing pattern of lower political trust in the areas most affected by the disaster. Although we do not have pre-crisis data for these specific areas, a comparison of post-disaster trust levels with those reported in earlier opinion surveys suggests that, with the exception of local governments, the natural disaster led to a substantial decline in political trust. For instance, in 2021, a representative survey in the Valencian Community reported average trust levels (on a 0–10 scale) of 4.7 for local government, 4.6 for regional government, 3.5 for the central government, and 4.9 for the European Union [CITATION REMOVED FOR BLIND REVIEW], which are significantly higher as compared to the ones reported in our survey (see Appendix A3)²⁸. In addition, we conduct a Coarsened Exact Matching analysis (Iacus, King and Porro, 2012) in Appendix A4.2 that tests whether pre-crisis characteristics associated to political distrust, such as support to populist vote individually or in the municipality were already more pronounced

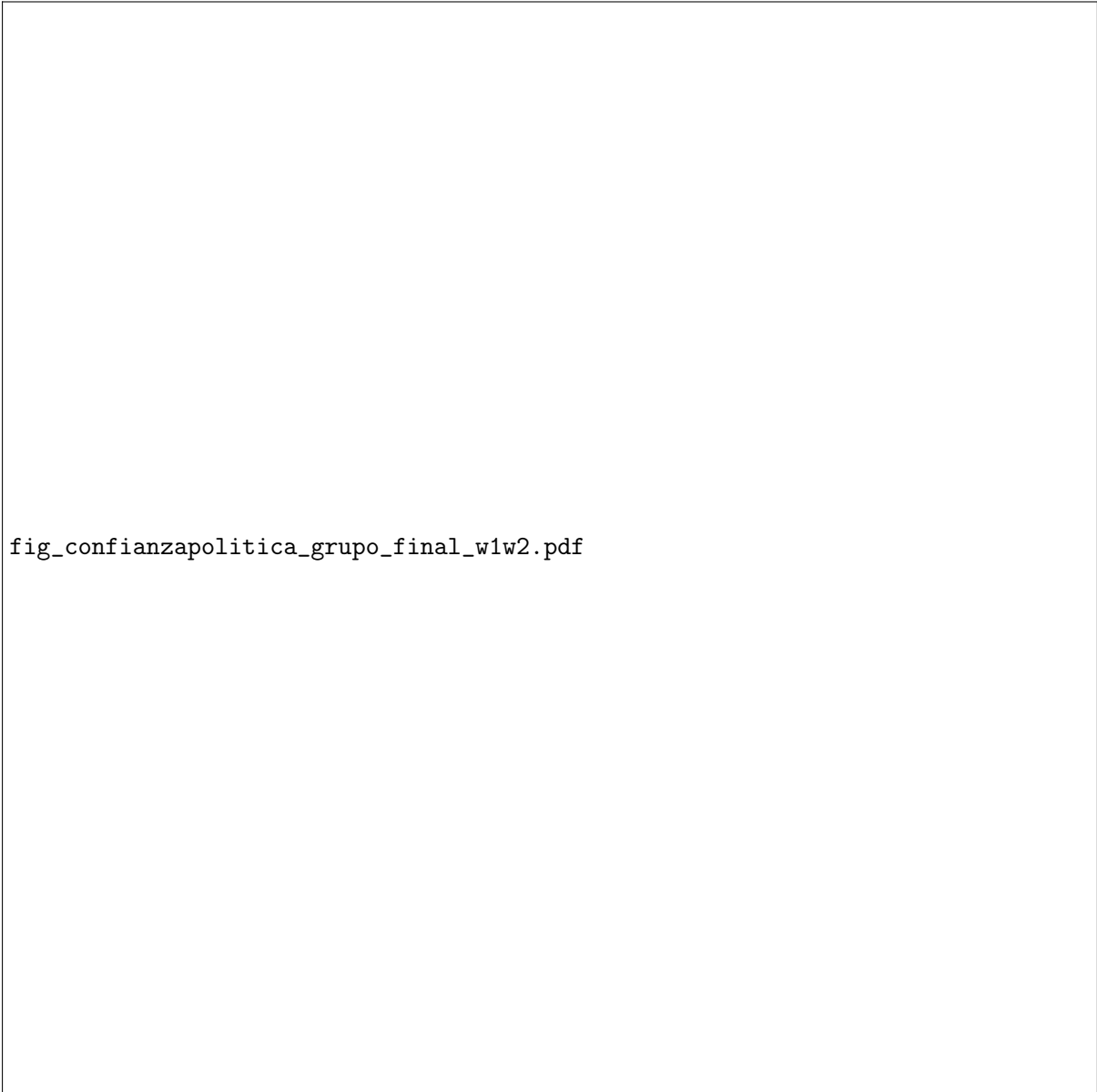
²⁶Trust in the European Union shows a comparable trajectory, with a significant negative effect in wave 1 that attenuates and becomes non-significant in wave 2.

²⁷Local authorities were closer to the affected population and less directly implicated in the widely criticized emergency management decisions. This, together with the fact that they enjoy systematically higher levels of trust than regional or central government in Spain could explain why trust remained relatively stable regardless of individuals' level of exposure to the crisis.

²⁸Obviously, post-disaster samples are not directly comparable to the 2021 regionally representative survey. However, we believe that the magnitude of the observed differences are so significant that they cannot be fully explained by differences in sample composition alone.

in the areas most affected by the disaster prior to the crisis²⁹. Results confirm this pattern even after accounting for these pre-crisis differences.

Figure 2: Trust in political actors by groups



We next examine the relationship between crisis intensity and trust in non-political actors.

Figure 3 exhibits the results of regressing trust on each institutional and societal actor having

²⁹We match individuals based on prior support for the radical-right party Vox in regional elections, which serves as a direct proxy for pre-existing attitudes on distrust; on Vox's local electoral in respondent's municipality, as a proxy for pre-crisis contextual conditions; and on age, gender, and educational attainment to account for demographic differences across exposure zones that could independently predict political distrust.

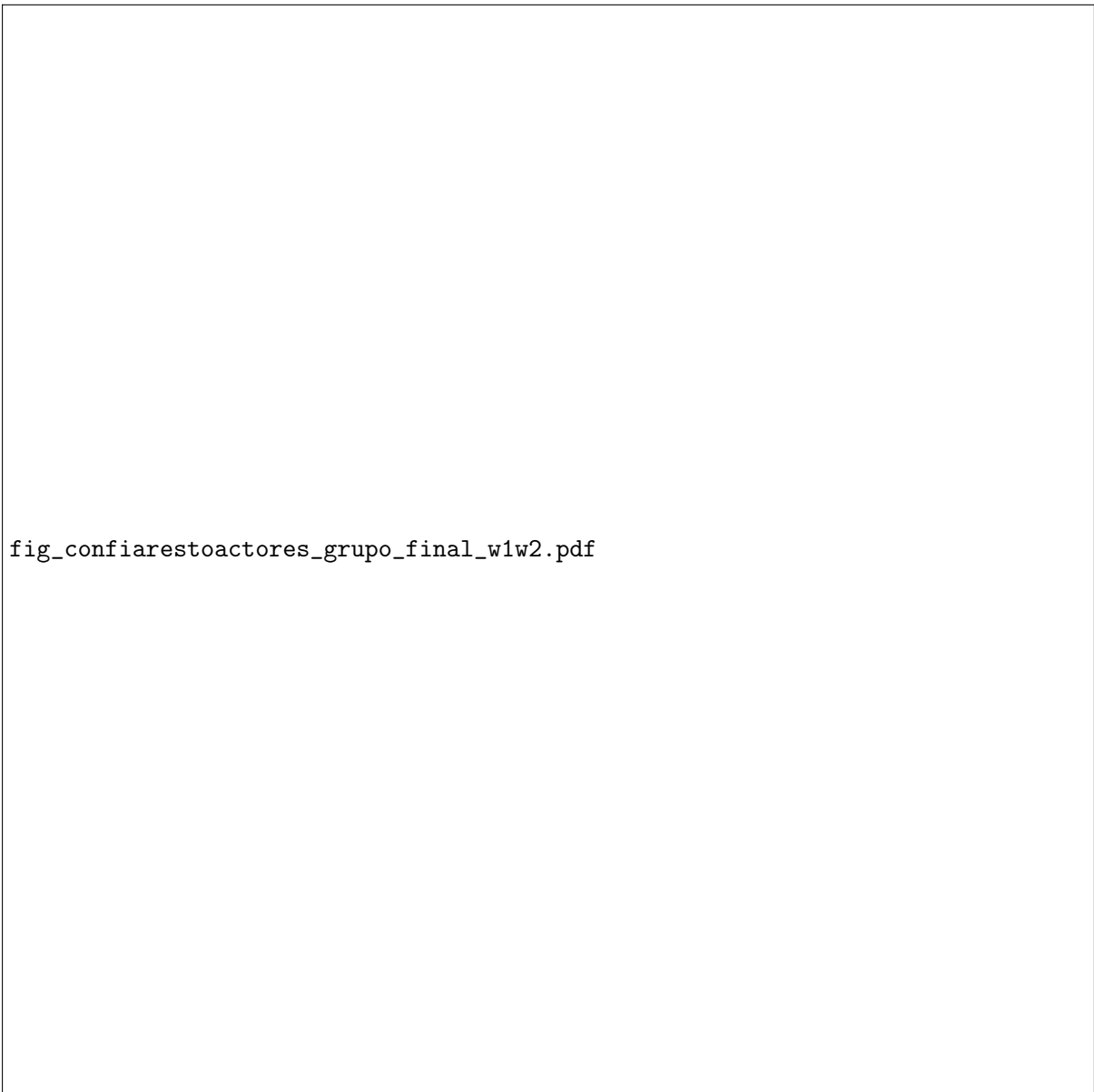
as main explanatory variable exposure to the disaster³⁰. Results show that trust in non-political actors, unlike trust towards political ones, remains virtually unaltered, particularly regarding institutional actors. Among the latter, individuals in highly exposed areas report marginally higher trust in the Military compared to the low exposed group in wave 1, though this effect attenuates and loses significance by wave 2. Trust in the State Security Forces and the Monarchy does not differ significantly across exposure groups in either wave.

Among societal actors, the results are more striking and in opposite directions depending on the actor. On the one hand, individuals in highly exposed areas exhibit significantly higher trust in volunteers compared to the low exposed group, and this effect is both substantively meaningful and persistent across waves. On the other hand, trust in NGOs follows the opposite pattern: highly exposed individuals report significantly *lower* trust in NGOs than those in low exposed areas in both waves. Finally, trust in experts among highly exposed individuals is not significantly different from the low exposed group in wave 1, but turns negative and significant by wave 2. Appendix A4.3 shows similar results when we regress trust in non-political political actors using distance to the flooded areas as an alternative measure of exposure.

Overall, the results support H1 by showing that political trust was significantly lower in the most affected areas. By contrast, levels of trust in most institutional actors remained largely stable among citizens in highly exposed areas, while trust in societal actors displayed more variation: trust in volunteers increased, whereas trust in NGOs declined. This pattern suggests that the disaster selectively eroded political trust while leaving non-political forms of trust comparatively intact, consistent with our theoretical expectation that political trust constitutes the most fragile dimension of institutional confidence.

³⁰All regressions include as control variables gender, age, education and ideology, and standard errors are clustered at the municipality level to account for the fact that crisis exposure varies at the municipal rather than the individual level.

Figure 3: Trust in institutional and societal actors by exposure to the disaster



ii. Anti-political attitudes

We now turn to H2, which examines whether crisis exposure also strengthens anti-political attitudes. We measure these attitudes using three different indicators: one for populist attitudes, another for technocratic attitudes, and a third for anti-system attitudes.³¹

Results are presented in [Figure 4](#). Individuals in highly exposed areas exhibit stronger

³¹The populist, technocratic, and anti-system attitude variables were constructed by summing individual responses on a 0–10 scale for specific survey items (see Appendix A5).

populist attitudes compared to those in low exposed areas in wave 1, supporting H2. The effect is modest but meaningful in size: highly exposed individuals score approximately 0.56 points higher on the populism index (which ranges from 0 to 30) compared to low exposed individuals – equivalent to 0.19 standard deviations – a small but informative difference given the already very high baseline levels of populist attitudes across the full sample (mean = 23.2/30). This effect does not persist in wave 2, where the coefficient is no longer statistically significant. A similar pattern emerges for technocratic attitudes, where highly exposed individuals score approximately 0.72 points higher than low exposed individuals in wave 1 - a marginally significant difference - which again attenuates and loses significance by wave 2. Differences in anti-system attitudes are not statistically significant across exposure groups in either wave, despite the overall high levels of anti-system sentiment across all groups. Mean scores on all three indices are uniformly high across the full sample and stable across waves³². Appendix A5 replicates the results on populist and technocratic attitudes using the distance-based measure of exposure.

As it was the case of political trust, higher levels of populist and technocratic attitudes in the most affected areas may predate exposure to the natural disaster. Structural factors-such as weaker infrastructure or economic vulnerability-may both increase the likelihood of exposure and contribute to higher levels of political disaffection and anti-political sentiment. To address this potential confounding, we replicate in Appendix A6 our analyses by using Coarsened Exact Matching.

Overall, results show that differences in populist attitudes between highly exposed and low-exposed areas (using distance to the floods) exist in wave 1 and persist in wave 2, even after accounting for pre-crisis individual and contextual populism as well as individual-level characteristics associated with populist orientations. In the case of technocratic attitudes,

³²On the populism index, the overall mean is 23.2 in wave 1 and 22.9 in wave 2; on the technocracy index, 26.0 and 25.2 respectively; and on the anti-system index, 24.0 and 23.6 - all on a 0–30 scale.

Figure 4: Populist, technocratic and antisystem attitudes by group

fig_pop_tec_anti_aggregated_final_w1w2.pdf

however, significant differences in wave 1 disappear.

iii. Crisis management preferences

Next we test whether citizens most affected by the natural disaster also exhibit a stronger preference for the role of non-political actors in crisis management (H3). To test this hypothesis, we use a pre-registered conjoint experiment in which participants are asked to choose six times between two different crisis-management committees, each varying in the types of actors

involved. Crisis management committees can be composed of political representatives (from the central, regional, or local government), institutional (non-political) representatives from the military, State Security forces and Corps (such as the police, Civil Guard, or firefighters), the Spanish Royal House, or European authorities; and societal representatives, including volunteers, NGOs (such as the Red Cross, Caritas, etc.), or experts (scientists and technicians). The only restriction on committee composition is that no actor can appear more than once in the same committee. [Table 2](#) presents two examples of committees formed by different representatives from which participants must choose.

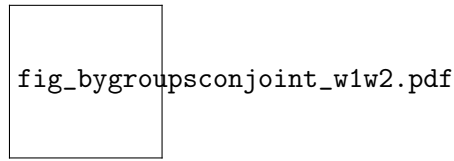
Table 2: Example of choosing a Crisis Management Committee

Committee A representatives	Committee B representatives
The Royal House	The European Union
The Spanish government	The regional government
NGOs (Red Cross, Caritas, Food Bank...)	Volunteers
Which of these committees would you choose to manage the crisis of a natural disaster?	
Options: Committee A Committee B	

[Figure 5](#) presents the marginal effects of the conjoint experiment for each different group (HE, ME and LE) for both waves using the regional government as the reference category ³³. Positive (negative) values in the graph suggest that a committee formed by the specified actor has a higher (lower) probability of being chosen by individuals. As shown in the graph, three non-political actors exhibit positive values with over a 10% probability change: the Military, the State Security forces and Corps, and experts. For instance, people are approximately 15% more likely to choose a committee involving the Military compared to the regional government, 13% more likely to choose one involving experts, and 11% more likely to choose a committee formed by representatives of the State Security Corps. In contrast, representatives from the Spanish Royal House decrease the probability of being chosen by 12 percentage points compared to the regional government. As for other societal actors (volunteers, NGOs) and the European

³³As observational data indicate, the regional government is the least trusted actor and receives the lowest performance evaluation in responding to natural disasters.

Figure 5: Results of the conjoint experiment by group (reference category: regional government)



Union, they also exhibit a detrimental effect on the likelihood of being selected.

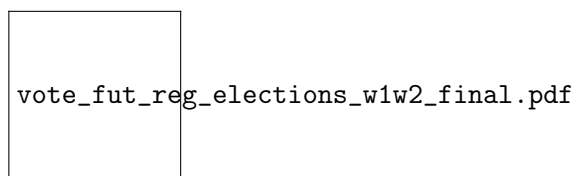
There are no significant differences across levels of exposure to the floods, except for preferences towards volunteers, as people living in most exposed areas are less likely to reject them as participants in crisis-management committees. Preferences are also remarkably stable across all exposure groups when we simulate the predicted probability of choosing a committee formed exclusively by neutral institutions (army, state and security forces) and experts vs choosing a political committee or a societal committee (see Appendix A7)³⁴.

Although these results do not support H3, the absence of a cross-group effect is theoretically informative. It suggests that, rather than a dose-response relationship between crisis intensity and preferences for non-political management, what emerges is a broadly shared rejection of political representatives - consistent with the generalised low-trust context documented throughout this paper. Citizens across all exposure groups strongly prefer institutional actors (military, security forces, experts) over political representatives, yet they consistently reject grassroots societal actors (NGOs, volunteers) as substitutes for formal crisis management.

Overall, our results qualify the interpretation of the widely cited slogan during the crisis in Valencia “Solo el pueblo salva al pueblo” (“Only the people save the people”): while it captured a genuine sentiment of community solidarity in the face of perceived governmental failure, our data suggest it held more symbolic than normative meaning - citizens did not actually want grassroots actors to take over crisis management responsibilities.

³⁴Predicted probabilities for the institutional/experts committee range between 0.82 and 0.84. No statistically significant differences emerge across exposure groups for political representatives either (predicted probabilities of around 0.46–0.53), nor for societal actors (approximately 0.30–0.36).

Figure 6: Vote intention in regional elections by group



iv. Electoral behavior in affected areas

Finally, in order to explore electoral behavior in the most affected areas (H4) we use vote intention in regional elections as the dependent variable and the level of exposure to the disaster as the main explanatory variable. As in the previous analyses, we include individual-level controls that may influence electoral behavior, namely age, education level, gender, and ideology. Regarding electoral participation, results in [Figure 6](#) reveal a significant increase in abstention in HE zones in Wave 1 (+4.7 percentage points compared to LE zones), though this effect does not persist into Wave 2. When restricting the sample to previous voters (to capture those that demobilize) the effect is both larger and more durable: HE zones show a 6.1 percentage point increase in the probability of abstaining in Wave 1, which, while attenuated, remains statistically significant in Wave 2 (+2.6 percentage points). To contextualise these magnitudes, abstention in the 2023 Valencian regional elections stood at 31%. A 6 percentage point increase thus implies a relative rise of approximately 19% above the baseline - a substantively meaningful shift. Crucially, these results cannot be attributed to pre-existing differences in electoral engagement across areas. Data from the 2023 local elections show that High Exposure municipalities actually had lower pre-crisis abstention rates (28.6%) than the Low Exposure control group (32.6%), meaning that crisis-affected residents were, if anything, more electorally mobilised before the DANA disaster. Demobilization is also robust to a Coarsened Exact Matching analysis (see Appendix A9).

We then test whether citizens in exposed areas exhibited disaffection toward the party system by punishing the two mainstream parties — defined here as the two dominant parties

in the Valencian regional party system, the incumbent Partido Popular (PP) and the centre-left PSOE, which was ruling the central government at the time³⁵. The observational data suggest a significant electoral penalty to mainstream parties in Wave 1 (-8.5pp , $p = 0.035$), mainly driven by the significant and intensifying penalty to the regional incumbent PP (-6.2pp in Wave 1, $p = 0.029$; -8.6pp in Wave 2, $p = 0.001$)³⁶, though this effect is partly confounded by pre-existing differences in PP support across exposure zones, as the Coarsened Exact Matching analysis in Appendix A9 confirms.

Finally, the results also point to a possible increase in support for the radical-right party VOX. Although the estimated effects do not reach conventional levels of statistical significance in either wave, Appendix A8 replicates the analysis using distance to flooded areas as the main explanatory variable and finds a positive and statistically significant association. In addition, the Coarsened Exact Matching analysis in Appendix A9 yields similar results, with a positive and marginally significant effect in Wave 2 ($\hat{\beta} = 0.052$, $p = 0.067$). These findings therefore provide suggestive evidence of increased support for VOX in more heavily affected areas, which is further supported by evidence provided in the next section.

Taken together, these findings provide partial support for H4. Dissatisfaction in the most affected areas translates primarily into electoral demobilisation — a withdrawal from political participation that persists more than a year after the disaster. In addition, the results provide tentative evidence of a limited anti-establishment shift toward radical alternatives, particularly VOX, concentrated in the most affected municipalities and intensifying over time. By contrast,

³⁵Non-mainstream parties comprise VOX (radical right), *Compromís* (Valencian regionalist green-left), and *Unides Podem-EUPV* (radical left). *Compromís* was founded in 2010 as a Valencian nationalist and green coalition. *Unides Podem-EUPV* combines the anti-establishment legacy of *Izquierda Unida* — through its Valencian branch EUPV — with *Podemos*, the left-wing populist party that emerged in 2014 in the wake of the *indignados* movement as an explicit challenge to the political mainstream. Finally, VOX, founded in 2013, is the most recently established of the three and occupies the opposite end of the ideological spectrum as a nationalist radical-right party.

³⁶The penalty is consistent with responsibility attribution: in Wave 1, 44% of respondents identified the regional government as the administration most responsible for managing the natural disaster, compared to 15% who identified the central government and 38% who considered both administrations jointly responsible. In Wave 2, attribution of responsibility to the regional government increased further: 48% viewed it as most responsible, compared to 13% for the central government and 37% for both administrations jointly.

although highly exposed respondents exhibit punishment toward the regional incumbent party, this effect does not survive robustness checks controlling for pre-existing differences in PP support across exposure zones.

v. Testing political distrust and populism as mechanisms

The cross-sectional results above establish that crisis exposure predicts both political distrust and electoral demobilisation. To provide panel-based evidence for the proposed causal chain (disaster exposure $\rightarrow$ eroded political trust and strengthened populist attitudes $\rightarrow$ electoral behavior) we leverage the subsample of respondents surveyed in both waves ($N = 665$) (see Appendix A10 with panel attrition data). The design is cross-lagged: wave 1 political distrust and populist attitudes serve as mediators that temporally precede wave 2 electoral outcomes. Because all electoral change outcomes are conditioned on wave 1 vote by construction, wave 1 electoral behaviour is implicitly controlled. It is worth noting that this design yields conservative estimates: since the observational results show that crisis-driven attitudinal and electoral changes had already materialised by Wave 1, the panel captures only the incremental $W1 \rightarrow W2$ shift, not the full extent of the treatment effect.

In a first step, we regress wave 1 political distrust and populism using distance to the floods to operationalize the intensity of the crisis, with controls for sex, age, and education (OLS, robust standard errors). Residing in the most affected municipalities increases political distrust at wave 1 by $\hat{\beta} = 0.658$ points, replicating H1 in the panel subsample, and is also associated with significantly higher populist attitudes, replicating H2.

In a second step, we regress each wave 2 electoral change outcome on wave 1 distrust using logit with the same controls, reporting average marginal effects (AMEs).

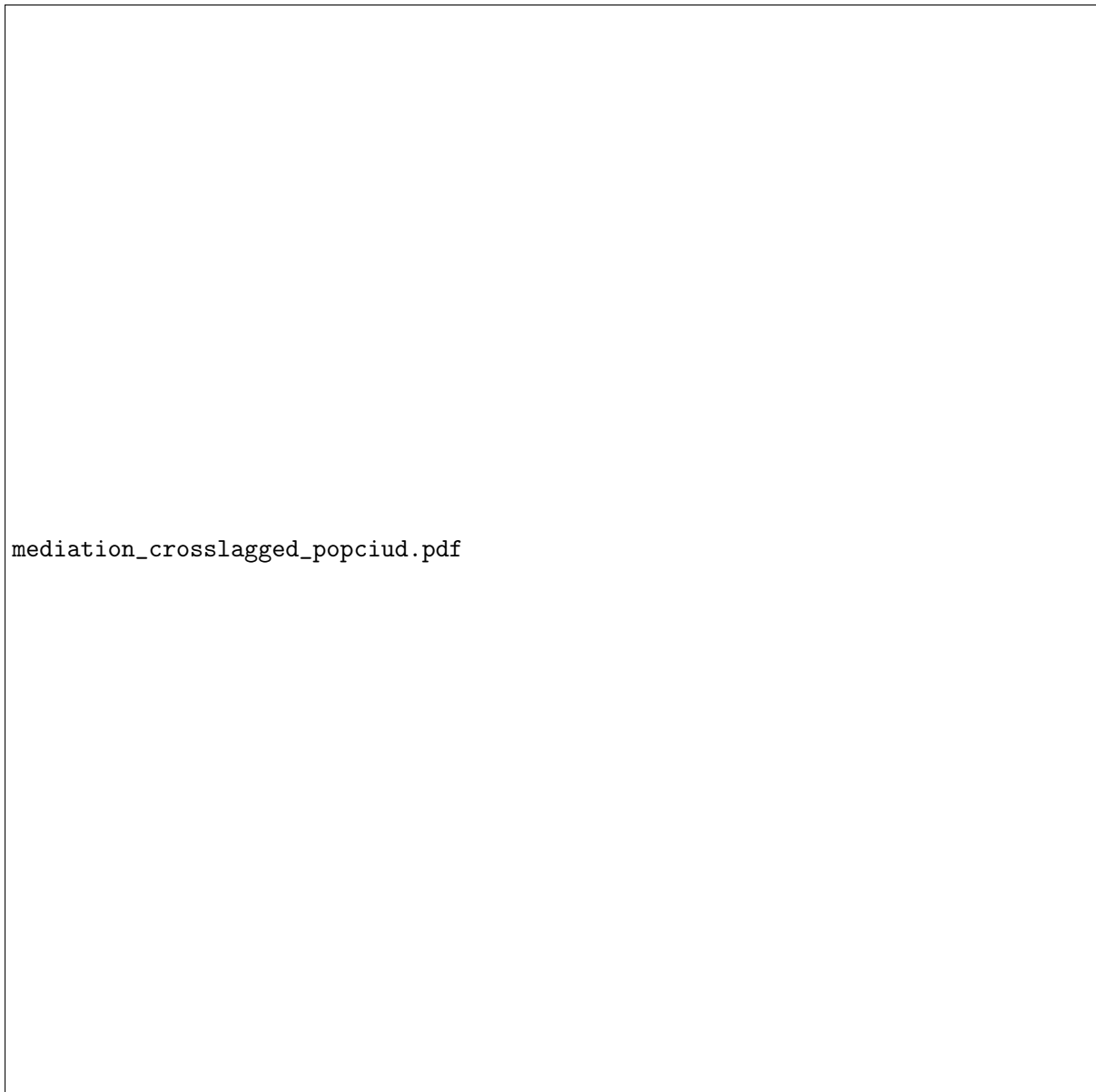
Results in [Figure 7](#) show that wave 1 political distrust significantly predicts broad demobilisation and switching to VOX at wave 2. The effect on mainstream punishment

is positive but does not reach significance, likely reflecting limited statistical power in that subgroup ($N = 198$ mainstream voters in wave 1). As a robustness check, [Figure 8](#) replaces political distrust with wave 1 populist attitudes as the mediating variable. Results show that wave 1 populist values significantly predict switching to VOX in wave 2.

Figure 7: Effect of wave 1 political distrust on wave 2 electoral change (panel subsample, $N = 665$)



Figure 8: Effect of wave 1 populist attitudes on wave 2 electoral change (panel subsample, $N = 665$)



VII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper contributes to the study of the political effects of natural hazards by theorizing how distrustful citizens react when exposed to an external shock in the form of a natural disaster. Our argument predicts that a negative shock to people's well-being, when political trust is already low, can push citizens past an individual tipping point of disengagement from representative institutions, deepening anti-political attitudes and distorting standard

mechanisms of democratic accountability.

Empirically, we test this theory using the October 2024 floods in Valencia, Spain. Leveraging variation in crisis intensity across areas, we find that, in the weeks following the disaster, citizens in the most affected areas exhibited lower political trust, stronger populist attitudes, and greater electoral demobilization. Panel evidence further shows that political distrust and populist attitudes measured shortly after the disaster predict subsequent electoral change, including movement toward the radical right. Taken together, these findings suggest that, in low-trust contexts, external shocks may weaken engagement with representative politics rather than simply redirecting electoral support toward mainstream alternatives.

A first limitation concerns our ability to account for pre-existing individual differences. The lack of pre-crisis individual data makes it difficult to establish conclusively that the differences observed in the most affected areas were not driven by pre-existing characteristics associated with both disaster incidence and citizens' political attitudes and electoral behavior. Nevertheless, robustness checks using pre-crisis data when available and Coarsened Exact Matching provide results consistent with our main findings. Future research testing our theory in other low-trust advanced democracies would benefit from pre- and post-crisis individual-level data.

A second limitation concerns the external validity of our findings, as our case combines several characteristics that make political effects particularly likely: a highly lethal disaster, low political trust, and government mismanagement. Yet these characteristics are not unique to Spain. Although most natural hazards causing more than 100 fatalities occur in developing countries, other advanced democracies have recently experienced similarly lethal events: 246 deaths in Japan in 2018 and 226 in Germany in 2021. More importantly for our argument, low political trust is not unique to Spain but characterizes several other advanced democracies. Distrust in political parties is widespread across Europe. In countries such as

Spain, France, Greece, and Slovenia, barely one in ten citizens trusts political parties ([European Commission, 2024](#)). Trust in national parliaments is also low across Europe (EU27 average of 36%), with several advanced democracies falling well below this average. Finally, while the mismanagement of the crisis in Spain was severe—there is an ongoing judicial investigation into the response of the regional government of Valencia to the floods—our theoretical argument suggests that precisely this combination of heightened citizen attentiveness during disasters and pre-existing low trust makes governments particularly vulnerable to public scrutiny.

More broadly, our paper contributes to research on the political effects of natural disasters by highlighting how their consequences may vary across different configurations of state capacity and political trust. In contrast to the low-trust setting examined here, governments in developed democracies with high political trust may be better equipped to withstand the negative political effects of disasters. Citizens may punish governments retrospectively while retaining confidence in the broader partisan system and in opposition parties' capacity to govern. In such settings, electoral reactions to disasters can therefore remain within conventional mechanisms of democratic accountability.

By contrast, different dynamics may emerge in developing democracies, where low political trust can coexist with low institutional and generalized trust, weak state capacity, and extensive forms of particularized trust, such as family, community, or religion ([Peeters and Dussauge Laguna, 2021](#), 967). When exposed to a natural disaster, citizens may rely on family and kinship networks to meet essential needs ([Peeters and Dussauge Laguna, 2021](#), 967), turn to foreign organizations ([Andrabi and Das, 2017](#)), or rely on non-state actors that fill the void of the state in service provision ([Acemoglu et al., 2020](#)). The political consequences may be more dramatic, including increased rebellious behavior and political conflict (?).

Building on these comparisons, the tipping-point concept can guide future research by explaining why disaster effects in low-trust democracies may differ qualitatively from those

observed in high-trust ones. Future work with pre-crisis individual panel data could test directly for non-linear threshold effects in trust trajectories, distinguishing the tipping-point mechanism from a simpler model in which disasters merely accelerate a linear erosion of trust.

To conclude, our findings suggest that the political consequences of natural disasters depend not only on government performance but also on the reservoir of political trust that exists before a crisis occurs. Where that reservoir is already depleted, a disaster may do more than generate electoral punishment: it can weaken citizens' engagement with representative politics and increase the appeal of radical alternatives.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author(s) declare none.

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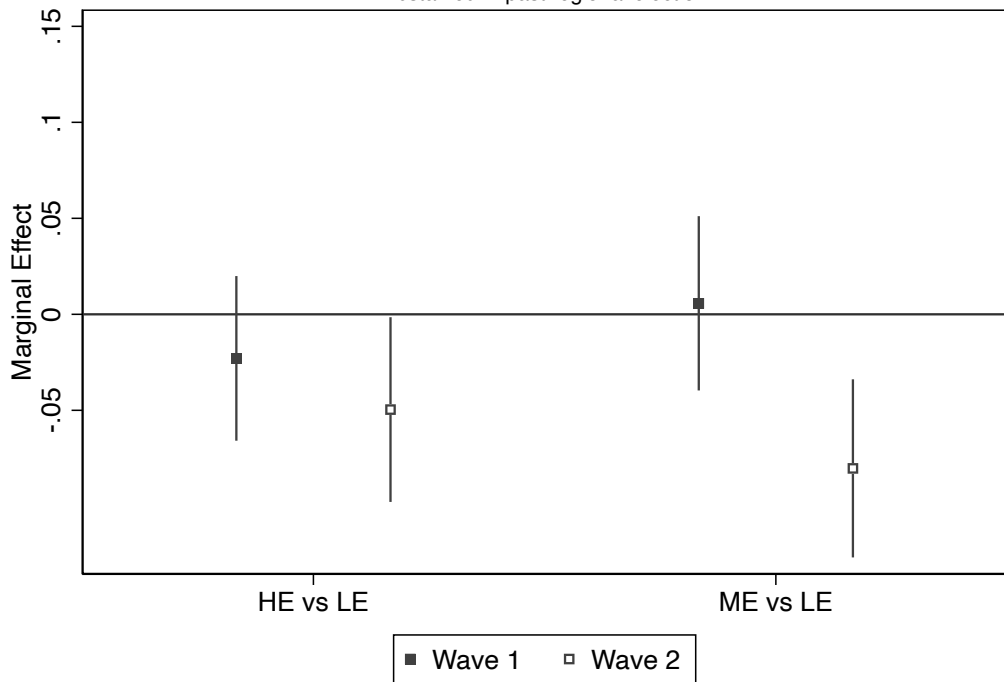
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Abstained in past regional election



Political

Institutional

Societal

Central government

Local governments

EU

The Army

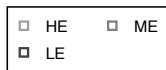
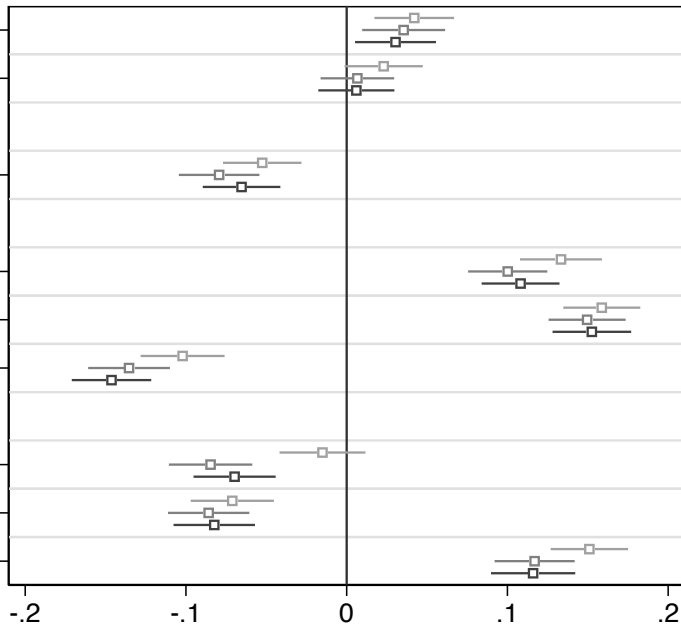
State security forces

The Royal House

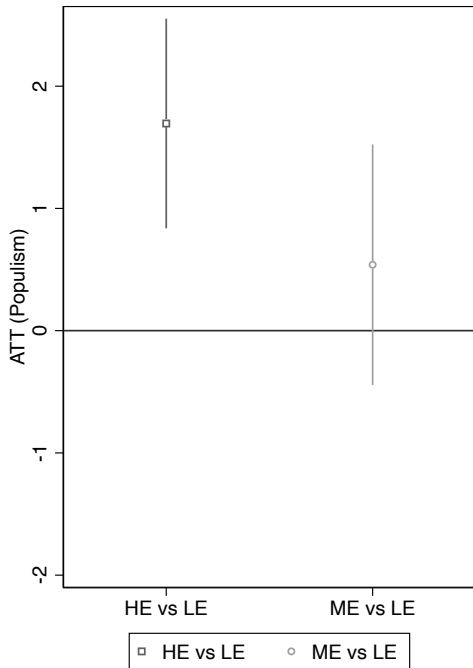
Volunteers

NGOs

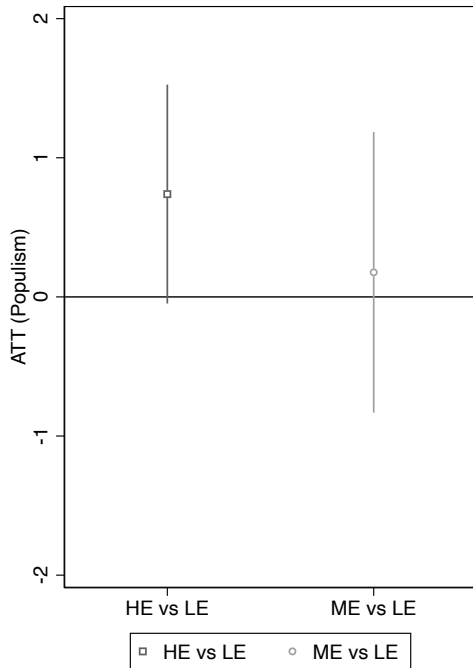
Experts

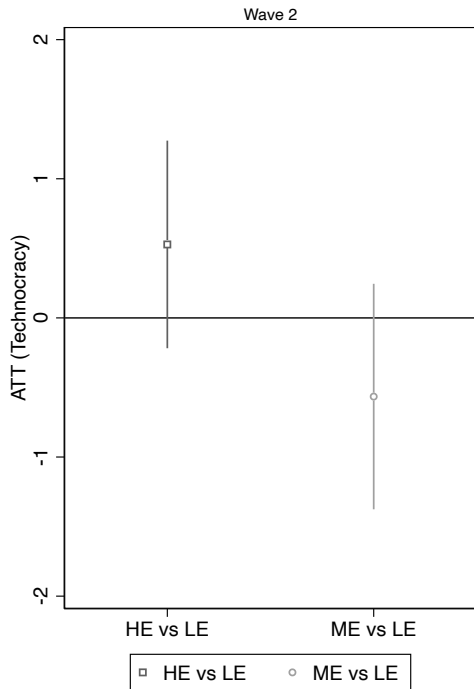
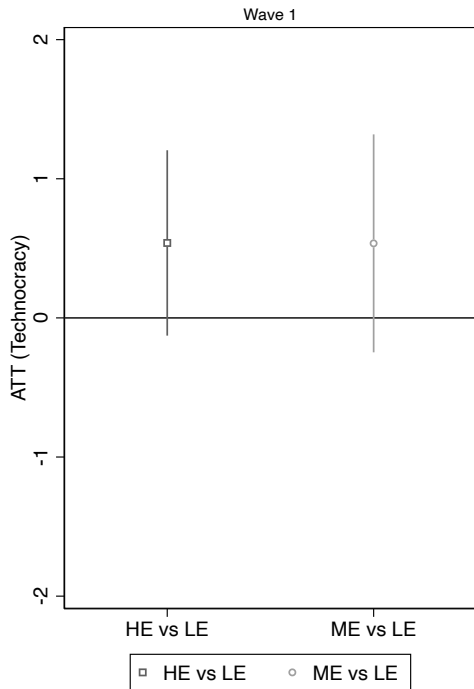


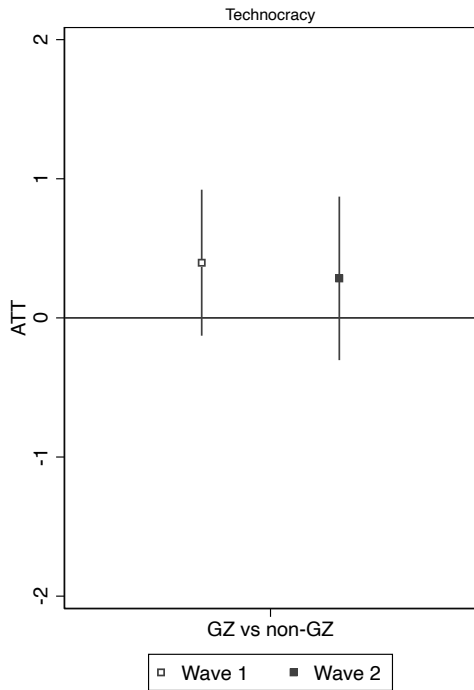
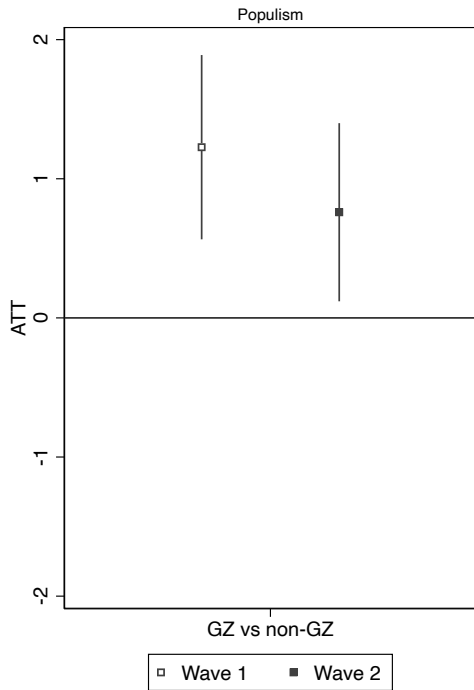
Wave 1

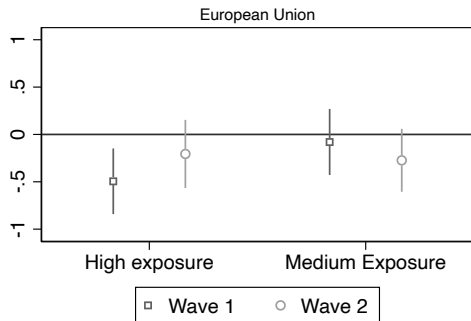
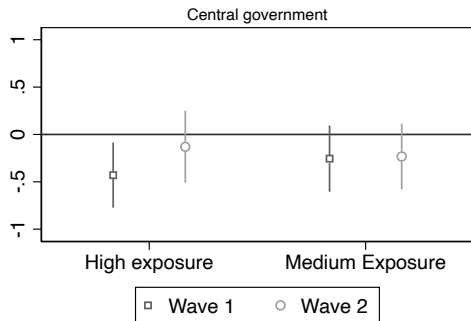
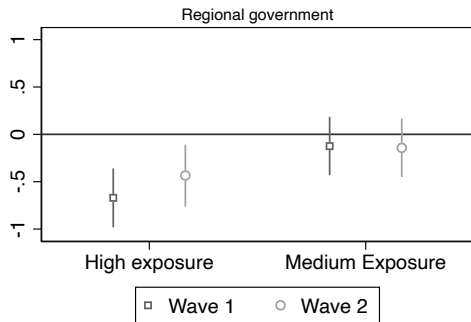
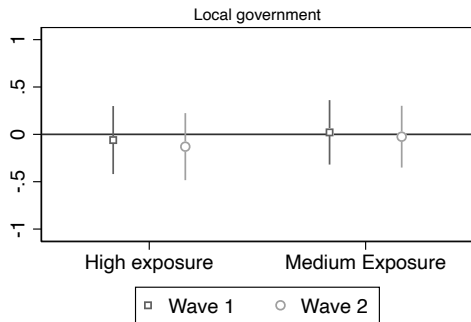


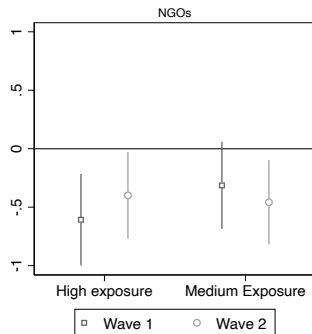
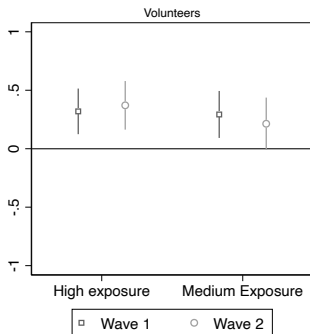
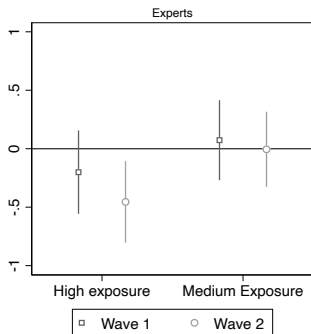
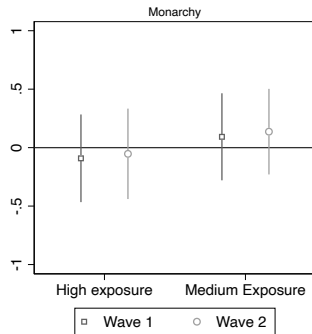
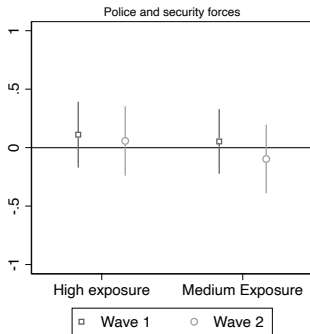
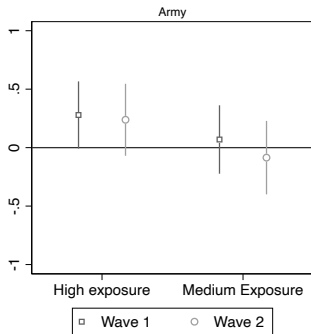
Wave 2

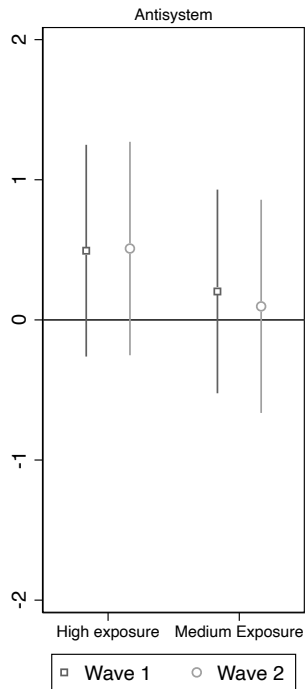
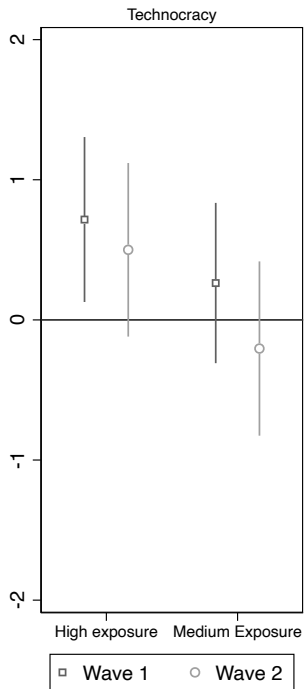
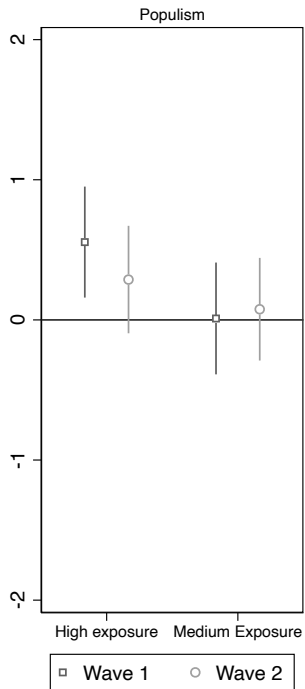




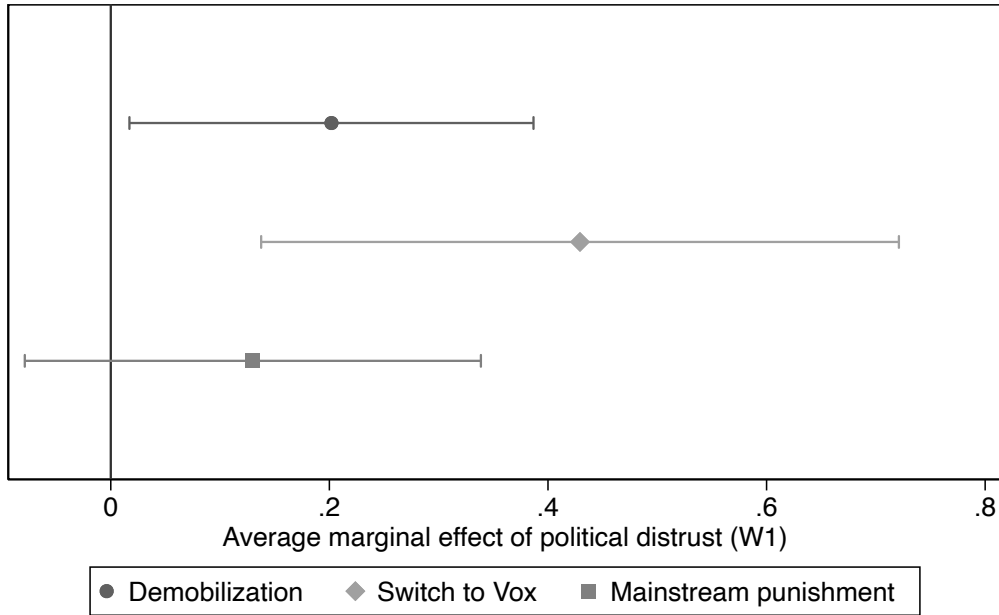






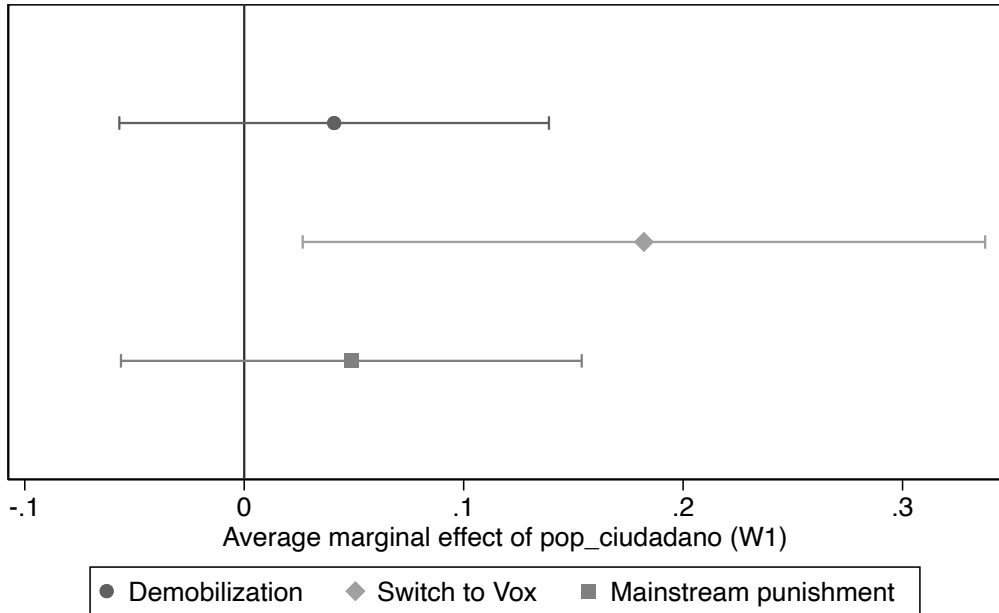


Effect of W1 distrust on W2 electoral change

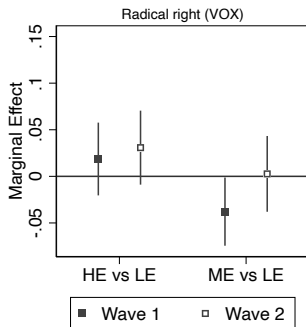
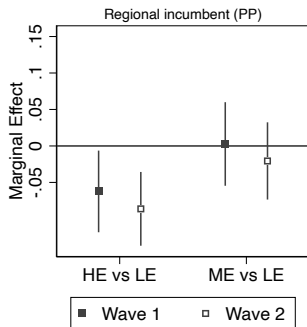
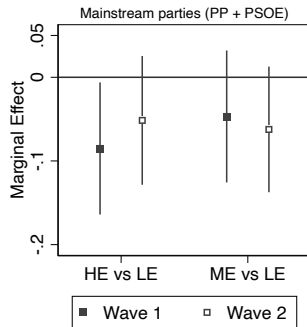
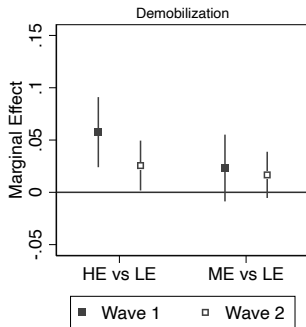
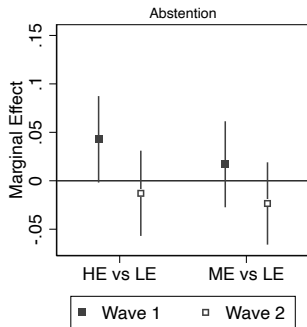


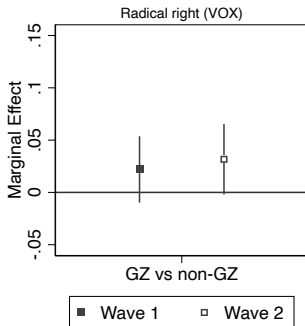
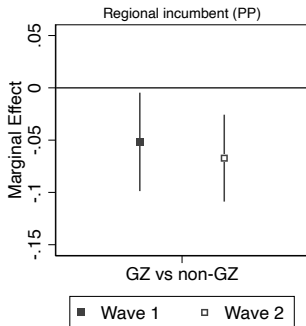
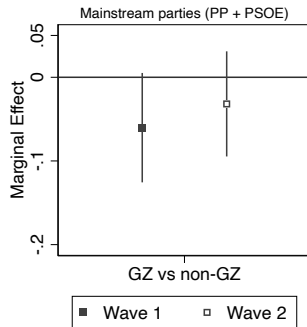
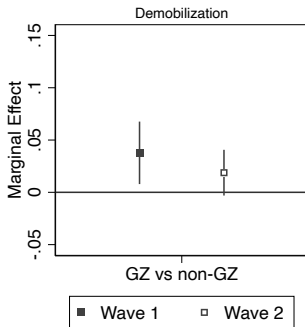
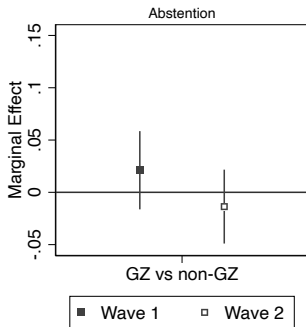
Panel subsample (N=665). Controls: sex, age, education, ideology W1 (categorical).
Distrust W1 = 10 - mean(trust regional, central, EU govts).

Effect of W1 populist attitudes on W2 electoral change



Panel subsample (N=665). Controls: sex, age, education, ideology W1 (categorical).
pop_ciudadano W1 (single item, 0-10).





Supplementary Files

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