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Regulation and Trust: Systematizing a Complex Relationship

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Regulation and Trust: Systematizing a Complex Relationship

Abstract

Despite growing interest in, and the increasing importance of, trust in regulatory governance and the regulatory state, we are still missing a systematic discussion of their interaction. This leads to conceptual ambiguities, disparate language for similar phenomena, and scholars talking past each other. This paper fosters clarity and systematization for a cumulative knowledge-building trajectory. We propose a multi-layered framework, which begins with a genealogy that traces how and when trust became important in the field of regulation and how it may redefine its boundaries. Next, we offer a basic typology that categorizes trust-regulation relationships into five core types—decoupled, substitutive, undermining, complementary, and reinforcing—based on mode (conflictual/cooperative) and degree (low/high) of interaction. We then expand it by disaggregating trust and regulation into key dimensions (level, design, and action) for richer, finer-grained analysis. Finally, we use the framework to introduce this special issue contributions. Our collective findings challenge conventional views depicting trust and regulation in negative, static and simplistic terms, revealing often complementary or even reinforcing dynamics, which can shift over time and be contingent upon the specific dimensions analyzed. Our framework promises to advance theoretical precision, guide empirical inquiry, and inform policy design in the field of regulatory governance.

Keywords: Regulatory governance, Trust, Regulation, Typology, Framework

Introduction

In contemporary regulatory governance and public policy, both regulation and trust are widely recognized as foundational elements for fostering cooperation, facilitating compliance, and bolstering the legitimacy of regulatory systems (Jordana & Levi-Faur 2004; Six & Verhoest 2017; Levi-Faur et al. 2020; Verhoest et al. 2025). Despite their acknowledged importance and interconnectedness, however, the field has struggled to systematically accumulate knowledge on the variety of ways in which they interact and how choices about trust and regulation shape our governance systems. This intellectual challenge stems largely from scholars often “talking past each other,” where significant analytical differences are obscured by superficial similarities in terminology, or conversely, similar dynamics are described using disparate language. The resulting problem is a fragmented research landscape, hindering cumulative knowledge-building. This paper directly addresses these scholarly gaps, aiming to foster greater clarity and systematization within the complex nexus of trust and regulation. We propose a multi-layered framework designed to advance theoretical understanding, empirical analysis, and policy formulation by providing a structured approach to analyzing this relationship.

We refer to regulation as governance by rule-making, rule-monitoring and rule-enforcement. The politics of regulatory governance refers to deliberate attempts to influence social, moral, risk and economic behavior, as well as to shape the institutional order. The term and the field encompass the constitution, promulgation, and enforcement of formal and informal rules by public and private authorities, alongside mechanisms of monitoring, enforcement and verification (Selznick 1985: 383; Baldwin et al. 1998; Levi-Faur, 2011, 2012; Koop & Lodge 2015). The rise of regulation as an instrument of government is associated with new institutions (e.g., regulatory agencies) and procedures (e.g., to aid credible commitment), judicialization, the “regulatory state” and even “regulatory capitalism” (Majone 1994; Thatcher & Stone Sweet 2002; Levi-Faur 2005, 2013). Trust refers to the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party, based on positive expectations of their intentions or behavior. These expectations are often grounded in an assessment of the second party's integrity, benevolence, and competence (Mayer et al. 1995; Rousseau et al. 1998). Distrust, conversely, denotes a lack of such positive expectations, leading to an unwillingness to be vulnerable (Six & Latusek 2023).

This Introduction proceeds as follows: We first provide a genealogy, tracing the evolution of the study of trust to highlight key intellectual shifts in the field of regulatory governance. Subsequently, we offer a basic typology categorizing trust-regulation relationships by degrees (low/high) and modes (conflictual/cooperative) of interaction. We then expand this framework by disaggregating both trust and regulation into key dimensions for richer, finer-grained variation. Finally, we position the contributions of this volume, to illustrate how our framework helps map the existing research landscape, identifying underexplored areas, and facilitating a more coherent, cumulative research agenda in regulatory governance.

A Genealogy of the Study of Trust in the Field of Regulatory Governance

This section traces the intellectual evolution of the scholarly engagement with trust in the field of regulatory governance. We identify how and when trust became important in the field and

how it may redefine its boundaries. The discussion also serves to pave the way for our proposed framework.

Throughout this genealogy, we use terms as they appeared in the literature at the time, without engaging in distinctions or problematizations that emerged in later scholarship, such as the argument that trust and distrust are distinct concepts rather than mere opposites (e.g. Van de Walle & Six 2014; for an application to regulatory governance, see Verhoest et al. 2024). In making this choice, however, we neither proclaimed the superiority of the conventional understanding of trust and distrust nor excluded more recent approaches. Rather than imposing any particular conceptual stance, we designed the framework to remain sufficiently flexible to accommodate both. Indeed, some contributors explicitly engage with newer understandings of trust and distrust in the context of regulatory governance (e.g., Verhoest et al. 2025b).

Our analysis reveals a progressive, albeit often implicit, integration of trust into the study of regulation, moving only gradually and slowly to the front. It started as a background condition and took a while to become an explicit subject of inquiry in the regulation literature. This evolution has been shaped by diverse disciplinary lenses and shifting societal concerns, each casting a distinctive light on the complex relationship between regulation and trust. One may say that trust becomes an explicit and central focus of study in the field only when the regulation literature and the governance literature came together to form the new field of regulatory governance, in the early 2000s.

An important source of interest in trust within the field of regulation came from early work on the decline of trust in government in the United States. In the field of regulation, the issue of public trust came to the forefront as early as in the 1970s and 1980s, driven by concerns over government overreach and (in)efficiency. Works like David Vogel's (1978) exploration of why American businessmen distrusted their state (despite extensive government support), or Lipset and Schneider's (1983) analysis of declining confidence in American institutions, implicitly linked general societal skepticism to the functioning of government, including its regulatory arm. The prevailing mood, influenced by public choice theories of "regulatory capture" (Stigler 1971) and the idea that "one cannot trust the trustees" (Peltzman 1976), fostered a perception that "government is the problem rather than the solution." While not always solely focusing on regulation, these works implicitly connected the general level of societal trust—or indeed, its deficit—to the perceived legitimacy and effectiveness of state intervention, thus influencing the regulatory discourse by suggesting that a crisis of public trust could lead to a crisis of regulatory legitimacy and effectiveness.

A second source of interest in trust within the field of regulation emerged indirectly, often through the lens of the comparative study of "policy styles." Early works on adversarial relations in the US context (e.g., Bardach & Kagan 1982; Kagan 2000) focused on the "problem of unreasonableness" and "adversarial legalism." These studies, while not explicitly theorizing trust, implicitly highlighted the pervasive role of distrust as foundational to the malaise of US regulatory systems. Legal accountability, procedural formalism, and adversarial safeguards were understood as mechanisms built precisely to cope with skepticism and a lack of innate trust – of citizens in governmental regulators, of regulators in regulated firms, and of parties settling disputes in one another. Martin Shapiro's "Who guards the guardians?" (1988) suggests that trust in government also became an issue of central focus, perhaps in line with the rise of a critical view of regulation in the US. Distrust, in this view, served as a key background characteristic explaining the emergence and functioning of adversarial legalism, prioritizing accountability through contestation over voluntary cooperation. Conversely, comparative studies of more cooperative and consensual European policy styles (Richardson 1982; Vogel

1986) and “gentle” Australian approaches (Grabosky & Braithwaite 1986) suggested regulatory environments where trust, though largely unexamined, played a more benign and facilitating role, enabling more flexible and less litigious interactions. Either way, the implicit nature of trust in these early works meant it was often treated as a cultural given or a residual category, rather than a variable to be examined by researchers and actively altered by policymakers.

A third source of interest in trust within the field of regulation emerged in the early 1990s, in the context of compliance and enforcement issues, particularly within the responsive regulation school largely associated with the Australian National University (ANU). Scholars like John Scholz (1984; Scholz & Lubell 1998a, 1998b) moved beyond implicit recognition, directly exploring the role of mistrust, duty, and fear in tax compliance. Their pioneering empirical work demonstrated that trust in government and in other citizens positively influenced compliance outcomes, suggesting that a purely deterrence-based approach was insufficient. Ian Ayres and John Braithwaite’s seminal *Responsive Regulation* (1992) fundamentally changed the discourse by taking trust seriously, arguing for its mutual constitution with empowerment and highlighting its cost-effectiveness in dealing with the complexities and uncertainties of the modern world. For them, trust was not merely a desirable outcome but part of the basic enforcement strategy – whose use, however, paradoxically depended on the threatening shadow of “benign big guns.” Valerie Braithwaite (1995) further advanced this by introducing the concept of “motivational postures,” empirically demonstrating how cooperative and respectful regulatory styles cultivated commitment and trust among regulatees, while punitive approaches provoked resistance, disengagement, or strategic game-playing. John Braithwaite and Toni Makkai (1994) provided compelling empirical evidence from Australian nursing homes, showing that treating managers as trustworthy improved compliance in subsequent inspections. This work collectively supported a regulatory model that combines a presumption of trust with a capacity for escalation, moving beyond – indeed, transcending – a simple “command and control” versus “self-regulation” dichotomy.

Fourth, concurrently, economists analyzed the “political economy of trust,” treating trust as a form of social capital with measurable economic payoffs and exploring its direct interaction with formal rules. This perspective offered a quantitative and instrumental view of trust. Studies by LaPorta et al. (1996) on trust in large organizations and Knack and Keefer (1997) on generalized interpersonal trust showed strong correlations between higher trust and more effective government, reduced transaction costs, and increased economic growth. They demonstrated how trust could function as a substitute for formal institutions, particularly in environments with weak property rights or contract enforcement, by reducing the need for costly contracts, enforcement, and monitoring. Critically, works like Aghion et al. (2010) explicitly explored the mutual, two-way relationship between trust and regulation. They first documented a strong negative correlation where lower interpersonal trust correlates with more extensive government regulation of markets. Their model features two stable equilibria—a “good” one with high civiness, low regulation, and high productivity, and a “bad” one characterized by low civiness, high regulation, widespread corruption, and low output. They went beyond, finding a vicious cycle where high regulation, once supplied due to low trust, further erodes the already scant trust. This line of inquiry strongly presented trust and regulation as potentially substitutive or even mutually undermining.

Fifth, the regulation literature engaged with institutional trust by reflecting on design principles for trustworthy institutions. Here one can identify a shift in the focus from individual disposition towards specific institutions (as in the first observation) to the institutional design

of the governance architecture itself. Sociologist Lynne Zucker (1986) defined institutional trust as distinct from process-based or characteristic-based trust (respectively based on past exchanges or social characteristics), emphasizing how formal societal structures—such as rational bureaucratic organizations, professional credentialing, and regulatory frameworks—are designed to produce and sustain impersonal trust in complex industrial societies. She argued that where process-based or characteristic-based trust is insufficient, institutions are created to “insure” against opportunism, thereby producing trust. Susan Shapiro's work (1987) on “guardians of impersonal trust” further explored the institutional and organizational mechanisms (e.g., procedural norms, structural constraints, licensing, audits, fiduciary bonds) built to protect and sustain impersonal trust relationships where direct personal oversight is impossible. John Braithwaite (1998) argued for a dual strategy of “institutionalizing distrust” at the structural level (through checks and balances preventing power abuses by any single institution) to simultaneously maximize the “enculturation of trust” in day-to-day interpersonal relations. Tom Tyler's influential research (beginning with his 1990 *Why People Obey the Law*) underscored how fair institutional processes build public trust which in turn leads to voluntary compliance, reducing the need for heavy-handed enforcement and bolstering legitimacy as well as efficiency. Michael Power's work on the “audit society” (1994, 1997) illustrates how formal verification rituals, while intended to build confidence and ensure accountability, can also reshape or even displace traditional forms of trust by shifting reliance from personal relationships to documented compliance. Carol Heimer (2001) posited that trust is a structural and organizational problem that institutions must actively manage through formalized mechanisms, further highlighting the paradoxical relationship where formal controls are necessary to facilitate trust but excessive reliance can undermine it. In short, this vast body of work highlighted how trust can be actively constructed and managed through conscious institutional design, rather than being a purely spontaneous outcome that cannot be altered by policymakers.

Sixth and finally, more recent scholarship has expanded the focus beyond conventional dyads (i.e., regulator-regulatee) or triads (e.g., regulator-regulatee-consumer/citizen; see Grimmelikhuisen et al. 2021) to a more complex understanding of multi-actor and multi-level trust relationships in regulatory regimes. This shift acknowledges that regulation occurs within networks involving a variety of actors—including political actors, administrative bodies, courts, regulatees, consumers, and their respective interest groups—that operate at national, supranational, and subnational levels. Works by Six and Verhoest (2017) and the TiGRE research project (2020-2023) have pushed forward the systematic exploration of how trust and distrust operate among these multiple actors and levels, arguing that a well-functioning regulatory regime requires a certain balance of trust and distrust which varies across these different relationships (see e.g., Verhoest et al. 2025a, 2025b; Kappler et al. 2024; 2025; Maggetti et al. 2025). This perspective moves beyond simplistic, overly-narrow focuses to examine how trust and distrust play out in complex regulatory ecosystems (for the wider argument applied to governance systems, see Six et al. 2025), with the most recent work adding to this a focus on regulatory strategies, action and regime design (see e.g., the RegTrust project and the GOBAREG project).

In sum, the works reviewed here highlight how different disciplinary lenses and shifting concerns have progressively brought the trust-regulation relationship into sharper focus within the literature on regulatory governance. This focus originated in broader societal concerns about state intervention, trust in business and government, and implicit assumptions about distrust in adversarial systems. These concerns later evolved into more explicit studies of trust in rule-making, rule-monitoring, rule-enforcement and compliance. At the same time,

questions of trust in relation to economic performance, institutional design, and interactions among multiple actors and across levels of governance became objects of scholarly attention. The field of regulatory governance has thus progressively grappled with various facets of how trust and regulation interact. Grasping these trajectories – and the diverse ways in which trust has been conceptualized and studied in relation to regulation – is not only intrinsically valuable but also crucial for laying the groundwork for future research in the field (Alson 2025; Attwell et al. 2025; Gómez Díaz 2025; Beetsma & Nicoli 2025; de Filippi et al. 2025; Bayern 2025; Pérez-Durán, & Verhoest 2025).

A General Typology of Regulation-Trust Relationships

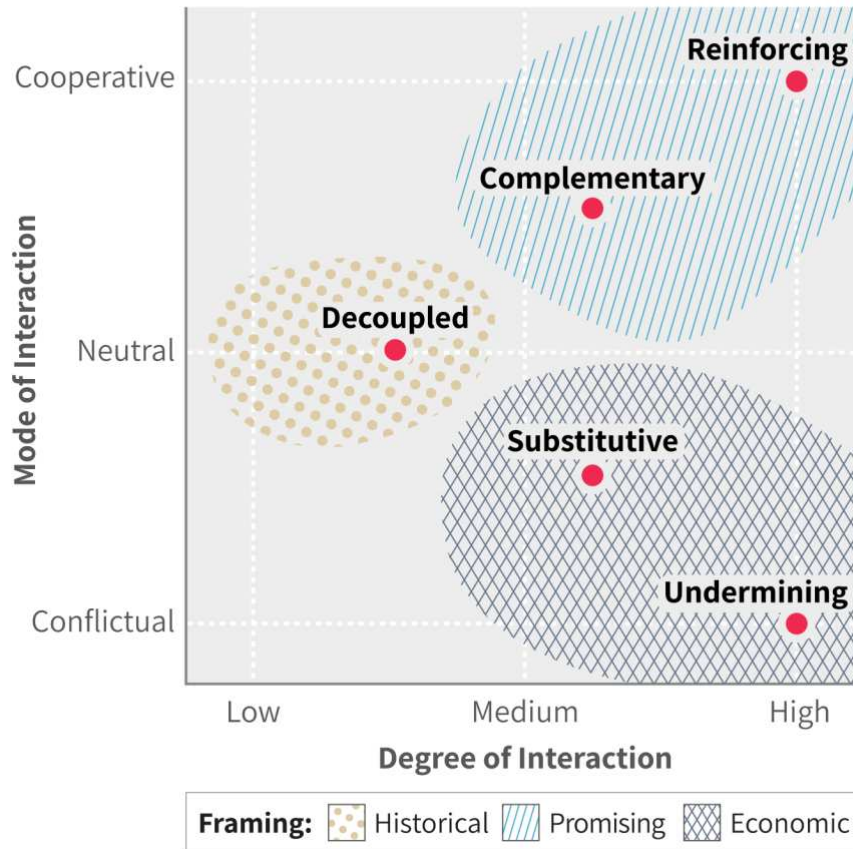
Having discussed the intellectual evolution of the study of trust and regulation, we now turn to a systematic classification of their possible relationships. Building on earlier efforts (e.g., Jordana & Levi-Faur 2004; Six & Verhoest 2017; Levi-Faur et al. 2020: 114-120) and seeking to go beyond them to offer a general yet robust framework, we propose a basic typology of trust-regulation relationships. This typology offers a high-level map for understanding their possible relationships, irrespective of the specific variations in their key dimensions that we will explore in the next section. Put another way, it proposes major genera of relationships, which the subsequent discussion will further disaggregate (cf. Dunlop & Radaelli 2013).²

As diagrammatically illustrated by Figure 1, our typology is structured along two fundamental axes, chosen for their centrality and familiarity in social science research, particularly in political science and public policy: i) the *mode of interaction*; ii) the *degree of interaction*. The “mode of interaction” ranges from highly conflictual, through neutral, to highly cooperative. The “degree of interaction” refers to the extent to which trust and regulation actively influence each other, spanning from low to high. It is important to underline that both axes represent continua rather than binary distinctions, allowing for a nuanced understanding. Equally, there are good reasons to assume these relationships to be dynamic rather than static, since they can shift and evolve.

A third general basis for differentiation is also captured in Figure 1. The purpose here is not to add a third dimension to the two key ones introduced above, but rather to introduce an interpretive layer that connects directly to our genealogical analysis and highlights how different scholarly traditions have approached the relationship between trust and regulation. In short, it may help situate the typology intellectually. Specifically, this perspective allows us to distinguish between three broad groups. The first, corresponding to the *Decoupled* type, reflects an early historical framing in which trust and regulation were largely studied in isolation. The second, encompassing the types located in the bottom-right quadrant (*Substitutive* and *Undermining*), reflects the conventional – often economic – framing, which tends to be relatively pessimistic and focused on substitution or even crowding-out effects. By contrast, the third group – capturing the types in the top-right quadrant – reflects a more recent and normatively promising framing, one that conceptualizes trust and regulation as potentially *Complementary* and *Mutually Reinforcing*.

² Equally, as explained in the previous Section, this Framework may be applied regardless of whether a researcher conceptualizes trust and distrust as distinct phenomena or as mere opposites.

Figure 1. Key Relationships between Trust and Regulation, by Mode and Degree of Interaction



Source: Authors' own elaboration (drawing on e.g., Six & Verhoest 2017; Levi-Faur et al. 2020; Verhoest et al. 2025a; Levi-Faur 2026).

At this point, it is crucial to clarify that our general framework, like others in social science (cf. Hirst & Zeitlin 1991), can be utilized in multiple, non-mutually exclusive manners. First, it serves as a *theoretical/normative model*, from which to derive expectations about how trust and regulation interact, and to consider how they should ideally interact. The first function thus helps understanding how scholars theorize these relationships, possibly attaching to them normative considerations about their (un)desirability. Second, the framework functions as an *analytical tool* for empirical research, helping to parse complex real-world relationships by identifying whether and when observed interactions match or deviate from the theorized types. Here, we refer to how trust-regulation relationships are observed in practice, not how researchers conceive them in theory. Third, and finally, our framework can act as a *diagnostic or critical tool*, aiding policy improvement by highlighting missing, underdeveloped, or problematic elements in real-world governance cases. This last function, therefore, bridges the gap between theory (especially its normative dimension) and empirical observation, generating policy recommendations.

Accordingly, Table 1 summarizes the five core types of relationships identified by our basic typology, each with its own distinctive theoretical, empirical, and diagnostic implications. In the remainder of this section, we discuss each of these types and their implications systematically and in greater detail.

Table 1. Types of Trust-Regulation Relationships

| <i>Type</i> | <i>Theoretical/Normative Model</i> | <i>Empirical Manifestation</i> | <i>Diagnostic/Critical Tool</i> |
|--|--|---|--|
| <i>Decoupled</i> <i>(low interaction, neutral mode)</i> | Independent, parallel operation for ≠ goals | Trust to govern artisans' quality, rules for tax compliance | Reveals "siloes"; suggests considering interaction |
| <i>Substitutive</i> <i>(medium interaction, moderate conflict)</i> | Functional equivalents; implies a trade-off | Trust replaces rules (e.g., tightly-knit communities) OR low trust necessitates rules | Identifies optimal use context; warns of "low-trust, high-regulation traps" |
| <i>Undermining</i> <i>(high interaction, high conflict)</i> | Mutually detrimental; problematic when both valued | Low trust → more regulation → even lower trust | Reveals vicious cycles; suggests reforms (e.g., of oppressive regulation) |
| <i>Complementary</i> <i>(medium interaction, moderate cooperation)</i> | Distinct, compatible functions towards = goal | Shadow of sanctions → effective trusting enforcement | Pinpoints underutilized compatibility; suggests leveraging both for better outcomes |
| <i>Reinforcing</i> <i>(high interaction, high cooperation)</i> | Mutually strengthening; most promising for synergies | Fair regulatory procedures → higher trust → greater voluntary compliance | Highlights virtuous cycles; encourages synergetic design (e.g., regulation to aid trust & reg. itself) |

Source: Authors' own elaboration (drawing on e.g., Six & Verhoest 2017; Levi-Faur et al. 2020). Legend: --> indicates "leads to" or "results in." = indicates "equal," ≠ indicates "distinct."

Decoupled (low interaction, neutral mode): We begin with this type because, while as social scientists we are naturally drawn to relationships where trust and regulation interact, we must not automatically assume this to be the case. This type is positioned towards the neutral end of the relationship spectrum and low on the degree of interaction (cf. Figure 1). Here, trust mechanisms and formal regulations address distinct functions or operate in parallel domains with minimal direct influence. They operate largely independently, and their co-variation (if any) is due to distinct external drivers rather than direct interaction. This type reflects what might be termed "distinct communities" of scholarship, where trust and regulation, as discussed in the genealogy, have long been studied in isolation. In short, this type challenges assumptions of inherent connection.

Empirically, an example could be a highly specialized professional community (e.g., independent artisanal cheesemakers) where quality and ethics are governed by strong, informal, trust-based peer reputation mechanisms, while general business taxation or basic labor laws (regulation) apply in parallel with minimal direct influence on the internal trust dynamics. One does not directly substitute for or complement the other (cf. with types below); they simply exist in parallel, governing different aspects of the artisans' professional life.

From a diagnostic or critical perspective, a decoupled relationship reveals “siloed” governance (besides compartmentalized research). It suggests the value of evaluating potential benefits of deeper interaction, or to recognize where attempts to link them might be ineffective or inappropriate.

Substitutive (medium interaction, moderate conflict): This type represents a conventional and familiar understanding, portraying trust and regulatory control as alternatives. It is positioned towards the conflictual end of the relationship spectrum, but less intensely conflictual than the ‘undermining’ type (see below), and at a medium degree of interaction (as one’s presence directly – and inversely – influences choice or functional replacement, not active, detrimental feedback). This dominant perspective suggests that where trust is high, less formal regulation is required, as trust can effectively substitute for coercive controls. Conversely, in conditions of low trust, regulation becomes a necessary mechanism to restrict actors’ discretion and mitigate vulnerability (cf. Gambetta 1988: 220-222). Research by political economists shows how levels of social trust precondition the level of regulation in a society (Knack & Keefer 1997; Aghion et al. 2010), and state that (societal) trust and regulation can substitute each other. In particular, low levels of societal trust tend to elicit more coercive and formalistic regulatory frameworks (Levi & Stoker 2000). This view has remained extremely influential—travelling from foundational studies (Braithwaite & Makkai 1994) to more recent contributions (Torfing 2023)—and being echoed in broader governance research as well (e.g., Börzel & Risse 2016; Ostrom 1990). In short, this is often the default interpretation, where control mechanisms (regulation) are seen as functional equivalents to compensate for a lack of trust. Normatively, it suggests a trade-off: societies can optimize for either high trust/low regulation or low trust/high regulation.

Empirically, this type is observed in contexts where informal trust replaces formal rules (e.g., tightly-knit business clusters where reputation and social sanctions suffice), or where pervasive low trust necessitates extensive formal rules and oversight (e.g., highly corrupt environments).

Diagnostically, this type highlights contexts for optimal use (e.g., high trust, low regulation) but also warns about the risk of “low-trust, high-regulation traps” where the imposition of rules does not solve the underlying trust deficit. Policy recommendations often focus on choosing the “right” mix based on the context at hand and notably the trust environment being faced.

Undermining (high interaction, high conflict): This type goes beyond mere substitution, depicting a more active and detrimental interaction where trust and regulation are mutually destructive. It is positioned at the most conflictual end of the relationship spectrum and high on the degree of interaction (Figure 1). Here, the very presence or nature of one actively erodes the other. As discussed in the previous section, prominent political economy research indicates not only that low-trust environments tend to demand more regulation, but also that when such regulation is supplied, it may, in turn, further diminish already low levels of trust (Aghion et al. 2010). Normatively, this type challenges simplistic views of regulation as always beneficial. It is problematic for those who – like ourselves – believe both trust and regulation are necessary for good governance, as it reveals a corrosive dynamic.

Empirically, this could be seen in situations where excessive or poorly designed regulation is perceived as intrusive or disrespectful, leading to resentment and further erosion of trust, even if the regulation was initially introduced due to a lack of trust. Another, concrete illustration is provided by work showing that a particularly aggressive regulatory reaction after a major failure might actually exacerbate distrust, in turn further undermining regulatory effectiveness (Gunningham & Sinclair 2009).

From a critical viewpoint, this type reveals vicious, destructive cycles. Policy suggestions focus on breaking these cycles, perhaps by reforming oppressive regulation that leaves “no breathing space” for trust to develop, or by addressing the root causes of distrust before imposing ever more rules.

Complementary (medium interaction, moderate cooperation): Shifting attention to the more cooperative, upper-right quadrant of Figure 1, we first find this type. Here, trust and regulation perform distinct yet compatible functions, working in concert to achieve shared governance goals. Indeed, such shared goals are what distinguishes this from the decoupled type. This type is positioned towards the cooperative end of the relationship spectrum, but less intensely so than the reinforcing type (see below), and at a medium degree of interaction (because trust and regulation support each other without arriving to be mutually reinforcing). When complementary, trust and regulation are not interchangeable (as in the substitutive type) but rather specialized tools that co-exist and are both helpful to support the same governance project. This perspective runs counter to the conventional view, suggesting that trust and regulation are not necessarily in opposition; instead, they can (be designed to) enable or support each other. It is normatively important because it suggests that leveraging both trust and regulation can lead to better governance outcomes than relying on either of them alone.

Empirically, an example is found in responsive regulation (Ayres & Braithwaite 1992), where the shadow of strong sanctioning powers (regulation) enables the effective use of trusting enforcement, by casting a credible threat of formal action that underpins the widespread use of more cooperative approaches. Another illustration: when inspectors trust industry, and this translates into improved voluntary compliance with regulation (Braithwaite & Makkai 1994).

Diagnostically, this type pinpoints underutilized compatibility, suggesting opportunities to leverage distinct roles for better governance outcomes. Policy recommendations focus, for instance, on designing regulatory frameworks that explicitly facilitate and build trust, rather than assuming a trade-off.

Reinforcing (high interaction, high cooperation): Finally, at the most cooperative and highly interactive ends of the spectra, we find this type – the deepest and most normatively promising interplay, where trust and regulation actively strengthen one another through a positive feedback loop. Here, one boosts the other, leading to mutual growth and a “virtuous cycle.” This goes beyond complementarity because trust and regulation are mutually constitutive and continuously enhance each other. Normatively, this can be seen as the ideal state of governance, where trust and regulatory systems create a synergistic environment, emphasizing co-evolution and continuous reciprocal improvement.

Empirically, this is evident in the work on procedural fairness associated with Tyler (1990; Tyler & Huo 2002): regulatory regimes can, by employing procedures perceived as fair, build public and regulatees’ trust, which in turn increases voluntary compliance and reduces the need for heavy-handed intervention, thus aiding key regulatory goals. Or, to continue with one of the examples above: this type would materialize if, after a more trusting enforcement style underpinned by the shadow of sanctions leads to good outcomes (e.g., high compliance, reduced social costs), this in turn fuels further delegation of (sanctioning) authority to regulators or an evolution towards even more cooperative regulatory styles.

Critically, this type highlights virtuous cycles, encouraging the strategic design of regulation to actively build trust and, in turn, strengthen the regulatory system itself. Policy interventions

here would focus on fostering conditions for positive feedback loops, leading to mutual growth of both trust and regulation.

In sum, this section has presented a foundational framework, offering a high-level map of five core types or genera of trust-regulation relationships. This basic typology is grounded in broad, baseline definitions of trust and regulation and allows us to categorize how trust and regulation relate across continua of valence and interaction.

Expanding the Framework: Key Dimensions of Regulation and Trust

We now expand our framework to enable richer, finer-grained analysis of the specific manifestations or nuanced forms of trust-regulation relationships. We do not create new named types within each of our five core types. Instead, we introduce three cross-cutting dimensions that apply to both trust and regulation, to capture the rich variation that can exist within each basic relationship³. We believe this is important because, while the interaction between regulation and trust is increasingly studied, findings across contexts remain fragmented and at times appear contradictory. This divergence suggests the need for a more refined framework that can systematically capture the conditional and multi-level nature of trust-regulation relationships. Indeed, we contend that the specific type of relationship (e.g., substitutive, complementary) observed is often conditional on the particular dimensions of trust and regulation at hand. Cumulative knowledge-building is thus hampered by the lack of a more granular mapping that allows learning for which dimensions of regulation and trust distinctive relational patterns (decoupled, substitutive, undermining, complementary, or reinforcing) can be theorized, observed, and recommended.

To address this, we propose three fundamental dimensions that apply equally well to both trust and regulation, as summarized in Table 2. We have sought to be parsimonious, avoiding to introduce undue complexity. These dimensions are chosen for their analytical utility and familiarity within public policy, political, and social science scholarship: (i) *Level(s)*, (ii) *Design*, and (iii) *Action*. We do not imply that these are the only transversal dimensions that shape trust-regulation relationships. Our choice to focus on these three, however, is justified by the well-established distinction between micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis, as well as by the philosophical concepts of agent and structure that political science has developed for over 25 years. Accordingly, today, any serious study must clarify what level(s) of analysis it tackles, and whether it focuses primarily on agency, structure, or both. By disaggregating both trust and regulation into these three essential and recognizable dimensions, we demonstrate the rich variation that can exist within each core notion and enable a more nuanced analysis of their interconnections, thereby reducing the risk of conflation or confusion. This expanded framework provides the analytical tools necessary to position existing research and formulate hypotheses and conclusions more precisely.

³ While Dunlop and Radaelli (2013) generate distinct “species” within each genus by introducing new dimensions that create additional types, our approach is thus different.

Table 2. Key Dimensions of Regulation and Trust

| <i>Dimension</i> | <i>For Regulation</i> | <i>For Trust</i> |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|
| <i>Level (micro, meso, macro)</i> | Individual (e.g., inspector), actor/organization (e.g., agency or firm), or regime/system (e.g., regulatory state) | Individual (e.g., trust in a person), actor/organization (e.g., trust in agencies), or regime/system (e.g., trust in the regime) |
| <i>Design</i> | Strategies (e.g., command-and-control, self-regulation), instruments (e.g., licenses, fines), and content (e.g., rules, standards, goals) of regulation | Strategies (e.g. interactional versus institutional; calculation-based, information-based and identification-based), instruments (e.g., shared-values networks, credible communication), and content (e.g., ability, benevolence and integrity as trustworthiness criteria) for trust |
| <i>Action</i> | Processes of implementation and enforcement , including procedures as applied (e.g., inspections) and actors' behavior | Processes , such as signalling, assessing, building, reducing, maintaining, or repairing trust, as well as trusting behavior |

The first dimension, *Level(s)*, focuses on the actors and entities that are the subjects (regulators/trustors) and objects (regulatees/trustees) of regulation and trust. Understanding the level at which a study (or phenomenon) is situated is crucial, as both regulation and trust manifest and operate differently across various scales. It is important to distinguish this from the level of observation, which refers to the unit from which data are collected. By contrast, the level of analysis (which chiefly interests us) denotes the unit about which theoretical claims are made or conclusions drawn. We identify three primary levels of analysis.

At the individual micro-level, regulation involves the actions of individual legislators, inspectors, or company CEOs as they formulate, implement, or respond to regulations. Studies at this level might examine individual compliance behavior or the discretion of individual “street-level bureaucrats,” for example. For trust, this level focuses on specific individuals as trustors or trustees, encompassing individual citizens' trust in specific government officials, an inspector's trust in a company CEO, or a company employee's trust in their direct supervisor. The individual experience of trust formation, erosion, or repair is also captured here. Works by Scholz and Lubell (1998a, 1998b) on individual tax compliance, for instance, primarily examine trust and regulation at this level, focusing on individual taxpayers’ perceptions and behaviors. At the same micro-level we also find studies showing how inspectors’ respectful, engaging behavior shapes regulatees’ interpersonal trust in regulators and their willingness to comply (Six 2013; Heimer 2001).

Moving to the actor/organizational meso-level, regulation examines the strategies, instruments, or enforcement activities of specific regulatory agencies, the compliance structures within regulated firms, or the collective actions of industry associations in self-regulation. For trust, this level includes citizens’ trust in a specific regulatory agency (e.g., a food safety authority), a regulator’s trust in a regulated firm or an industry association, or inter-organizational trust between different government departments. The work of Braithwaite and Makkai (1994) on regulator-regulatee trust in Australian nursing homes, for instance, analyzes organizational compliance based on individual managers’ perceptions of trust, fitting this level. Much of the European work on trust and regulation over the last decade has focused on regime actors or stakeholders and their trust relations (see for an overview Six & Verhoest 2017; Verhoest et al.

2025a; cf. e.g., Kapler et al. 2024; Maggetti et al. 2025), alongside significant attention to citizen trust in regulatory agencies (Grimmelikhuijsen and Knies 2017; Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2023; 2024; 2025). At this level, research suggests that trust in regulatory actors is undermined by features such as lack of transparency, accountability and competence; procedural unfairness; and being captured by self- and/or sectoral interests (e.g., Grimmelikhuijsen et al 2023; for a review, see Verhoest et al. 2025a). Conversely, the opposite features would strengthen trust in these organizational actors.

Finally, at the broadest regime/systemic macro-level, regulation concerns the overall design or architecture of a sectoral regulatory regime or even the “regulatory state,” including its dominant philosophy (e.g., command-and-control versus responsive regulation) and systemic impact on economic or social outcomes. For example, the political economy research by Aghion et al. (2010) on the extent of government regulation in societies with varying levels of trust operates at this level. For trust, this level includes generalized societal trust (e.g., “most people can be trusted” as measured by LaPorta et al. 1996; Knack & Keefer 1997), citizens’ trust in the overall regulatory system or the regulatory state as a whole, or the trustworthiness of a specific governance model (e.g., polycentric versus state-centric regulation). Tyler’s research on citizens’ trust in legal authorities (e.g., 1990), while often collecting data from individuals, draws conclusions about the legitimacy and functioning of the broader legal system. While research from regulatory governance scholars into trust that focuses on the design or functioning of complete regulatory regimes is scarce, some is emerging. For instance, Levi-Faur (2020) develops theoretical ideas on how polycentric regimes, which decenter regulatory powers to multiple actors and intermediaries, may result in higher trust than state-dominated monocentric regimes (see also recent studies like Maman et al. 2023; Verhoest et al. 2025b).

It is important to note that many studies, particularly in complex governance contexts, often span or connect multiple levels of analysis. Thus, not only might research observe individual citizens’ survey responses (individual level of observation) but analyze how these aggregate into broader trust in a regulatory agency (actor/organizational level of analysis). It might also encompass different levels of analysis: for instance, how trust in a particular regulatory body (actor level) influences overall trust in the regulatory system (regime/systemic), through the mechanism of institutionalization of trust across levels (Kroeger 2012, 2015). Conversely, systemic distrust can shape individual interactions (Kroeger 2015). Thus, while we identify distinct analytical levels, their interconnections are crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the trust-regulation nexus. Researchers must carefully specify their level of analysis to avoid fallacies of aggregation (e.g., ecological fallacy) or disaggregation (e.g., individualistic fallacy). For our special issue’s purposes, this means that research findings on how trust and regulation relate at one level should not be conflated or integrated without careful consideration of studies focused on different levels.

The second dimension, *Design*, concerns the specific attributes, criteria, or content that define regulation and trust, focusing on the structural and substantive elements which can be deliberately shaped and modified. It refers to the structure part in the agency-structure distinction which is core to political and other social sciences (e.g., sociology). For regulation, this refers to the specific strategies, instruments and content of regulatory design (cf. Baldwin et al. 2012: Chs. 7-10, 14). This encompasses formal choices made in regulatory frameworks, from direct strategies like command-and-control to indirect ones such as self-regulation, plus other more sophisticated models such as meta-regulation (Coglianese & Mendelson 2010), responsive regulation (Ayres & Braithwaite 1992), and principles-based regulation (Black

2008). It also covers regulatory instruments like licenses, permits, bans, or nudges, as well as the content of rules and standards (e.g., environmental emission limits, financial reporting standards, product safety rules). Interestingly, the choice of these elements may signal a regulators' (or indeed, policymakers') attitude of either trust or distrust toward regulatees and the wider society. A highly detailed and coercive framework, for instance, may signal a distrust of a regulatee's intentions or capacity, whereas a more principles-based approach conveys confidence in their goodwill and competence. This signaling, in turn, can evoke a behavioral reaction of regulatees and the wider society.

For trust, the “design” dimension involves, in terms of content, the specific attributes or criteria that are intended to foster trustworthiness or are expected from a trustee. It is the “blueprint” or “plan” for trustworthiness, encompassing widely discussed dimensions of trustworthiness (e.g., Mayer et al. 1995; Tyler 1990; Grimmelikhuijsen & Knies 2017), notably ability/competence (trust in the trustee's skills, expertise, and capacity), integrity (trust in the trustee's honesty, fairness, and adherence to moral principles), and benevolence (trust in the trustee's concern for the trustor's well-being), as well as procedural justice/fairness (trust derived from the perceived fairness of processes and decision-making). This dimension also includes the explicit trust strategies which actors can choose to build, signal, or assess these attributes. In the trust literature, several typologies of such strategies have been developed, referring to the different bases or sources for trust (see Latusek et al. 2020). For example, trustees can use interactional versus institutional trust-building strategies, and likewise trustors can use both related interactional and institutional sources to assess the trustworthiness of these trustees (Bachmann 2011; Dietz 2011). Actors, like regulatory agencies in their relation with regulatees, can go into interactions to build, as well as to assess, trust, both in terms of cognitive and socio-emotional aspects. But these actors can also use ‘institutions’ to structure or affect the relation or the behaviour of other actors through a logic of consequence or appropriateness (Oomsels & Bouckaert 2014). Such institutions can be formal rules or roles, or informal routines, habits and social norms which provide a common ground for how to behave and what to expect from each other (Uslaner 2002). Another relevant classification of strategies and sources of trust is the one by Lewicki and Bunker (1996, p. 121; see also Zucker 1986 for an alternative classification) who refer to (a) calculus-based trust, mainly grounded in sanctioning institutions activated in case of a trust breach, (b) knowledge-based trust, when actors use information exchange to build trust with each other, and (c) identification-based trust, when actors build trust by cultivating shared views, values and goals. To pursue these trust strategies, actors choose specific instruments, which range from relation- and community-building based on shared values (like networks with the same professional norms), to information exchange and reputational sanctioning, to more formalized frameworks for transparency, accountability, and participation (e.g., Trivino & Jordana in this volume; or third-party certification as a trust building instrument, see Smolenska & Levi-Faur in this volume) or for shared norms related to roles (e.g., codes of conduct) or structure (e.g., regulatory independence of regulatory agencies, see Verhoest et al. in this volume). Understanding these trust design choices is crucial, as they represent the frameworks or intentions for how trust is meant to function.

Understanding the specific design under examination is critical, as different regulatory strategies or trust dimensions will interact in distinct ways. For instance, trust in “ability” might be more responsive to certain regulatory instruments (e.g., technical standards) than trust in “benevolence.” Moreover, as the examples mentioned above show, some of the strategies and instruments for trust can indeed be based on regulations. Hence, not only will regulatory design choices evoke and necessitate design choices in terms of trust strategies and instruments (e.g., command-and-control regulation institutionalizing distrust versus principle-based regulation

signaling trust), but also the other way around: some trust strategies and instruments need regulations to take shape.

The third dimension, *Action*, focuses on the real-world dynamic, unfolding processes of regulation and trust, capturing how these phenomena are actually enacted, experienced, and evolve over time in practice. This dimension aligns with the “action” or “implementation” aspect, exploring the practical application and behavioral dynamics.

For regulation, this refers to the dynamic processes of regulatory implementation and enforcement. This is where the action or implementation aspect is most prominent, often revealing divergences from initial design (cf. e.g., Rangoni 2023). Indeed, influential regulatory scholars have suggested that the ineffectiveness of rules can often be explained by a mismatch between rule types (design) and enforcement strategies (action) (Baldwin 1990). This dimension includes regulatory procedures, such as formal steps and routines involved in regulation (e.g., inspection protocols, consultation processes, appeals procedures) – as they are applied in practice. It also covers regulatory interactions, which are the actual encounters and communication between regulators and regulatees (e.g., an inspector's demeanor, a firm's responsiveness to inquiries). Heimer (2001), for example, explores how a regulator's interactional stance can aggravate or soften the effects of a distrusting regulatory strategy, by respectively adopting an open and respectful or else a disrespectful and overly watchful stance. Finally, regulatory behavior refers to the actions taken by regulatory actors (e.g., the choice to issue a warning versus a fine, the degree of discretion exercised by street-level bureaucrats).

For trust, this dimension encompasses the actual enactment, behavior, and dynamic unfolding of trust in real-world interactions. It is how the “designed” trust strategies, instruments or intentions play out in practice. This involves processes of signaling (how actors communicate trustworthiness or intentions through transparent reporting or consistent behavior), assessing (how trustors evaluate trustworthiness through monitoring, observation of behavior, or media coverage), building/reducing (actions that lead to an increase or decrease in trust, such as a regulator demonstrating impartiality or a firm engaging in greenwashing), maintaining/repairing (strategies used to sustain trust or restore it after a breach, for instance, through investigations and reforms after a financial crisis), and spilling-over (how trust or distrust in one domain affects another). Crucially, this also includes trusting behavior, which refers to the actual actions taken based on trust (e.g., voluntary compliance, participation). For example, institutional strategies for trust, in which institutions like regulations or other abstract systems are used to foster trust, rely upon how trustors experience the daily “facework” of the system's representatives (e.g., the inspectors representing the regulatory agency) (Giddens 1990). If these representatives are perceived to act in an untrustworthy way, the institutional strategy for trust will not work well.

By considering these dynamic real-world processes, we can move beyond static descriptions to analyze how trust and regulation actually co-evolve, influence each other's trajectories, and shape outcomes in real-time. This dimension is particularly salient for understanding “vicious” and “virtuous” cycles.

By combining the five core types of trust-regulation relationships (our genera: Decoupled, Substitutive, Undermining, Complementary, Reinforcing) with these three dimensions (*Level, Design, Action*), we generate a significantly richer framework. This allows us to move beyond simply stating that a relationship is, for example, “complementary,” to specifying what kind of trust (e.g., individual trust in competence) is complementary with what kind of regulation (e.g.,

a specific regulatory instrument) through what process (e.g., signaling fairness). *Inter alia*, this also helps solving apparently contradictory findings, since two studies may well be focusing on the same key type of relationship and yet differ in their specific dimensions. In sum, this multi-dimensional mapping enables scholars to pinpoint exactly where their research contributes, identify specific gaps in the literature, and formulate more precise hypotheses for future inquiry, thereby facilitating a more coherent and cumulative research agenda.

Positioning the Contributions: Illuminating the Trust-Regulation Nexus

Having developed a multi-layered framework that categorizes trust-regulation relationships into five core genera and thereafter disaggregates them along three cross-cutting dimensions, we can now use this framework to position the diverse contributions of this special issue. The goal is twofold: highlight the unique contributions offered by each paper, and showcase the value of our framework.

The papers in this special issue cover a wide set of empirical contexts, ranging from financial regulation in the European Union (EU) and the United Kingdom (UK), nursing home services in Spain, and AI (Artificial Intelligence) governance in The Netherlands, to public service innovation in China, health regulation in the Global South as well as broader issues of trust in government during crises in Australia. This diversity also extends to methodologies. We indeed take pride in our methodological pluralism, which includes large-N surveys, conjoint experiments, qualitative case studies, and fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA), offering varied and robust perspectives on the trust-regulation nexus.

Table 3 summarizes how each paper in the special issue is positioned within the framework, synthesizing each contribution’s core type(s), dimensions, and insights. Notably, while our basic typology includes a *Decoupled* type, none of the contributions focuses on this relationship where trust and regulation operate in entirely separate spheres with minimal interaction. Instead, while some papers do identify substitutive or undermining relationships, the majority reveal complementary or even mutually reinforcing interactions. Moreover, the contributions often illuminate dynamic shifts across types, as well as the contingency of trust-regulation relationships on the specific dimensions being examined.

Table 3. Special Issue Contributions: Key Type(s), Dimensions, and Insights

| <i>Contribution</i> | <i>Type(s)</i> | <i>Dimensions</i> | <i>Insights</i> |
|--------------------------------|----------------|---|---|
| <i>Li, Chen, and Tong</i> | Substitutive | Level (Individual/Actor), Design (Regulation) | The absence of clear regulatory design can lead to reliance on a specific type of trust (integrity) as a substitute. |
| <i>Heimer</i> | Undermining | Level (Individual/Actor), Action (Regulation/Trust) | A disrespectful regulatory stance can actively erode trust, creating a vicious cycle between regulation and individual trust. |
| <i>Smoleńska and Levi-Faur</i> | Complementary | Level (Actor), Action (Regulation/Trust) | Regulation of a trust-building mechanism (ESG providers) complements self-disclosure, |

| | | | |
|--|--|---|---|
| | | | working together to create a trustworthy system. |
| <i>Versluis, Spendzharova, and Feltkamp</i> | Complementary | Level (Actor), Design & Action (Regulation) | Flexible regulatory design and strict enforcement can work together to manage low trust and uncertainty in emerging technologies like AI. |
| <i>Jordana and Triviño-Salazar</i> | Reinforcing | Level (Actor), Action (Regulation) | An agency's strategic vulnerability can build reciprocal trust with stakeholders, strengthening the regulatory system's legitimacy and effectiveness. |
| <i>Verhoest, Maggetti, Redert, Latusek and Jordana</i> | Reinforcing | Level (Actor/Systemic), Design (Regulation/Trust) | Specific design choices in regulatory regimes are associated with high trust among actors and in the regime itself, initiating a positive cycle. |
| <i>Ford</i> | Multi-Modal (Undermining & Reinforcing) | Level (Systemic), Design (Regulation/Trust) | The erosion of foundational rule of law norms undermines trust in the regulatory state, while restoring these norms is crucial for rebuilding it. |
| <i>Braithwaite</i> | Multi-Modal (Undermining & Reinforcing) | Level (Individual), Action (Trust) | Government action can reverse an undermining cycle of low trust, or let it spiral into a deeper and less manageable state of distrust. |
| <i>Maman, Feldman, and Tyler</i> | Multi-Modal (Reinforcing & Undermining) | Level (Individual), Action (Regulation/Trust) | A promising strategy aiding voluntary compliance can be vulnerable to polarization, revealing how the relationship can shift between reinforcing and undermining. |
| <i>Pérez-Durán, Rozas-Bugueño, and Rincon</i> | Multi-Modal (Reinforcing & Decoupled) | Level (Individual), Design (Regulation) | The relationship is not monolithic; some regulatory attributes can reinforce trust while others are decoupled from it. |
| <i>Gómez Díaz, Pikos, Houlberg Salomonsen, and Guaschino</i> | Multi-Modal (Reinforcing & Undermining) | Level (Actor), Action (Regulation) | The media acts as an intermediary in shaping stakeholder trust in regulatory agencies, with positive coverage reinforcing trust and negative coverage undermining it. |
| <i>Latusek, Pikos, Six, and Wardaszko</i> | Foundational | Design (Trust) | The dimensions of trustworthiness must be adapted to the specific context, replacing "benevolence" with "impartiality" for public institutions, including agencies. |
| <i>Rangoni</i> | Multi-Modal (Undermining to Reinforcing) | Level (Systemic), Action & Design (Regulation) | Targeted regulatory action can reverse a negative trend, shifting the relationship from an undermining type to a reinforcing one. |

Navigating Trade-offs: The Substitutive Type. We begin by examining the *Substitutive* type, which represents a conventional understanding of trust and regulation as functional equivalents, implying a trade-off where one can replace the need for the other. Li, Chen, and Tong (this volume), in their comparative analysis of conjoint experiments in China, explore how regulatory contexts affect civil servants' trust in NGO contractors for public service innovation. Their work operates at the individual level for trust (civil servants' perceptions) and the actor/organizational level for the regulated entities (NGOs). They demonstrate that

when regulations concerning service quality and scope are less developed—a condition of regulatory uncertainty—civil servants place less importance on competence-based and benevolence-based trustworthiness. Instead, integrity-based trust becomes more important. This illustrates a substitutive relationship: the absence of clear regulatory design for certain attributes leads to a different reliance on specific dimensions of trustworthiness. At the same time, this is a more sophisticated dynamic than simply “less regulation, more trust,” as it shows how the design of regulation can alter the basis of trust that actors rely upon, with a particular type of trust (integrity-based) functionally replacing the assurance that more developed formal rules would otherwise provide.

Unpacking Negative Dynamics: The Undermining Type. When the degrees of interaction and conflict heighten, relationships become *Undermining*, revealing corrosive dynamics where the presence or nature of one (trust or regulation) actively erodes the other, often creating negative feedback loops. Heimer (this volume) offers a qualitative case study of HIV clinics across different countries. Her analysis, operating at the individual level for the experience of trust and the actor/organizational level for clinics, focuses on how the institutionalization of distrust—through elaborate verification requirements—is modified by the interactional stance of monitors in practice. Heimer finds that when mandated distrust is coupled with a disrespectful interactional stance during regulatory encounters, it actively erodes trust and perpetuates inequalities, particularly in resource-constrained settings in the Global South. This illustrates a vicious cycle where the process of regulatory action, despite its designed intentions, can severely undermine trust at the individual level, leading to a breakdown in cooperation.

Forging Partnerships: The Complementary Type. The *Complementary* type describes relationships where trust and regulation perform distinct but compatible functions, working in concert towards a shared goal. These papers illustrate how different elements support each other without necessarily being mutually reinforcing. Smoleńska and Levi-Faur (this volume) investigate how the regulation of ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) rating providers aims to repair and build trust in sustainable finance governance. The paper’s initial sequence—from a trust deficit to the emergence of a regulatory response—could seem like a purely substitutive dynamic. However, the paper’s core argument and its placement in the complementary type rest on a more sophisticated, multi-stage process. It begins with the observation that widespread greenwashing leads to a deficit of trust in firms’ self-reported sustainability claims. In response, a new regulatory intermediary (ESG rating providers) emerges. This is not a direct, command-and-control state intervention that replaces the market. It is a new layer of governance that provides a specialized service: external, verified assessment. This new mechanism’s function is distinct from that of the firms’ self-disclosure, and it is meant to complement it by providing the crucial information needed for a trustworthy system. The paper then proceeds to recognize that, before long, intermediaries themselves may become distrusted. It thus goes on to examine how the EU and UK regulate these intermediaries. This is regulation of a trust-building mechanism, whose purpose is not to replace the intermediaries, but to ensure their own trustworthiness—addressing issues like their ability, integrity, and methodology. Overall, the paper’s entire sequence demonstrates a complementary relationship where market-systems and two distinct regulatory mechanisms—the intermediaries themselves, and the public oversight that governs them—

work together to achieve the shared goal of a polycentric trustworthy sustainable finance system.

Versluis, Spendzharova, and Feltkamp (this volume) examine the preferred regulatory approach to AI among regulators and professionals, using the case of The Netherlands and a combination of surveys, interviews and statistics. The authors hypothesize a sequence where regulators' trust in AI providers/users and their affect towards AI technology influence their perception of AI risks/benefits, which in turn shapes their preferred regulatory approach. They find relatively low trust in AI providers and users, relatively positive feelings for AI itself, uncertainty about its risks and benefits – and a preference for flexible, adaptive regulation that is strictly enforced by public institutions. This paper suggests a complementary relationship: rules that are flexible (by design) are seen as necessary to foster innovation and adapt to evolving technology, while strict public enforcement (when it comes to regulatory action) is simultaneously preferred to compensate for the low trust in private AI actors and manage inherent uncertainties. This is not a substitutive dynamic, as it is not about replacing low trust with rigid, conventional regulation, but rather about combining distinct regulatory functions to govern AI. While, like Smoleńska and Levi-Faur (this volume), this study focuses on the level of actors, it differs from it by concentrating on the heuristics of regulators and the design and enforcement of regulation for emerging technologies.

Fostering Synergy: The Reinforcing Type. The Reinforcing type describes the deepest and, in our view, most normatively promising interplay, where trust and regulation actively strengthen one another through a positive feedback loop, leading to mutual growth of both trust and the regulatory system. Jordana and Triviño-Salazar (this volume) examine how independent regulatory agencies (IRAs) intentionally incorporate vulnerability into their accountability mechanisms to enhance stakeholder trust. The paper introduces the concept of agency vulnerability, whereby agencies voluntarily disclose sensitive information that could lead to criticism, penalties or even institutional termination, but has the potential of making their accountability more credible. It then tests this empirically, looking at IRAs in Spain across several sectors. While recognizing that the degree of vulnerability and the breadth of the stakeholders targeted will vary across contexts, the authors find that this strategic vulnerability, by signaling the agency's trust in stakeholders, also aids stakeholders' trust in the agency, ultimately building reciprocal trust. This highlights a reinforcing dynamic where regulatory choices actively cultivate trust, which in turn strengthens the regulatory system's legitimacy and effectiveness.

Verhoest, Maggetti, Redert, Latusek and Jordana (this volume) explore how specific design choices in regulatory regimes foster both trust among regime actors and in the regime as such. The authors begin with the premise that a crisis of trust (a low point in the cycle) in food, financial and data protection has prompted regulatory reforms; these reforms are a direct response to a trust deficit. They then use a sophisticated fsQCA study to identify configurations of regulatory design choices that are associated with high trust among regime actors and in the regulatory regime itself. Their findings often reveal surprising patterns. For example, not only do they show that rules whose strictness is perceived as appropriate are associated with higher trust. They find that centralized (i.e., single) regulatory agencies engender trust when accompanied by dense information-sharing obligations with other regime actors, but the same outcome can also be achieved by multi-agency regulatory arrangements, as long as these agencies have high degrees of independence. We can categorize this paper under

the reinforcing type because it provides the “recipe” – or better, a set of recipes – for building a mutually supportive relationship. It starts from a crisis of low trust and identifies the design choices that move the system towards a state where trust is high, thus initiating a positive cycle. Compared to Jordana and Triviño-Salazar (this volume), its focus is more squarely centered on regulatory design (as opposed to action) and, by examining design choices across multiple countries and sectors, it offers a broader comparative perspective on reinforcement.

Multi-Modal and Multi-Dimensional Insights: Spanning the Spectrum. Several papers offer insights that span multiple types or highlight the complex interplay across various dimensions, further demonstrating the framework’s analytical value. These contributions often reveal how the relationship between trust and regulation is highly conditional on the specific dimensions being examined, or how types can shift over time. Ford (this volume) offers a broad conceptual paper on trustworthiness in the regulatory state, operating at the regime/systemic level. Ford argues that this trustworthiness is fundamentally rooted in liberal democratic rule of law concepts. She critiques how the regulatory state has often failed to demonstrate its trustworthiness in practice and highlights the profound challenge posed by illiberal tendencies, first of all in the North American context. This paper primarily operates within the undermining type, describing how the erosion of foundational normative commitments can undermine the very basis of justified trust in regulation. However, it also implicitly points to the reinforcing type by arguing that restoring these foundations is crucial for rebuilding trust. Ford’s work differs from Heimer’s (this volume) by operating at a higher level of abstraction, focusing on the regime/systemic level and the normative substance of trust and regulation, rather than specific interactions shaping individual psychological dispositions.

Braithwaite (this volume) uses the case of the Covid-19 pandemic in Australia to draw broader lessons about the relationship between citizens and government in times of crisis. She distinguishes trust from distrust: the latter is not merely low trust but something deeper, more entrenched, and harder to change. Further, drawing on motivational posture theory, she identifies two key postures vis-à-vis authority (in this case, government): resistant defiance and the more challenging dismissive defiance. Braithwaite argues that resistant defiance is associated with low trust and breaches of trust (e.g., disagreement with government lockdown decisions). Yet such breaches can be repaired if government engages constructively—for instance, through genuine dialogue. By contrast, distrust reflects the belief that government’s trustworthiness cannot be restored, even if it behaves in accordance with trust norms (such as demonstrating capability and responsibility). This is linked to dismissive defiance, in which individuals become emotionally and psychologically detached from authority. At that point, governments must rely on alternative strategies, such as deterrence—strategies that carry their own problems and limitations. The key lesson, therefore, is that to avoid the more intractable pathway of dismissive defiance, governments should engage with, and even embrace, resistant defiance before it leaks into dismissive defiance. The study thus illustrates how the undermining type may be reversed—or spiral downward—conditional on whether governments act before low trust turns into distrust.

Maman, Feldman, and Tyler (this volume) investigate the viability of trust-based regulatory approaches, such as self-regulation, in contexts of polarization and ideological extremity. These approaches are considered promising precisely because of their normative virtues, which include facilitating voluntary compliance. The paper begins by hypothesizing that ideological extremity lowers trust, which could jeopardize a trust-based approach. Yet, it finds a more

complex and interesting dynamic. Rather than simply undermining trust, the study reveals that in a polarized society, compliance becomes more contingent upon trust. The findings highlight a fragile and conditional relationship that can shift between the reinforcing type (whereby regulation is aided by trust, if present) and the undermining type (whereby regulation is hindered by trust, if this is low). Specifically, the study finds that extreme left-leaning individuals place a higher weight on trust in authorities when deciding to cooperate and comply. This contribution lies in its focus on how a promising regulatory strategy—self-regulation—is affected by the psychological dispositions of individuals in polarized societies, revealing how simplistic hypotheses are rapidly challenged by complex and intriguing real-world dynamics.

Pérez-Durán, Rozas-Bugueño, and Rincon (this volume) use a conjoint experiment to examine how different regulatory designs (e.g., public vs. private ownership, severity of sanctions) affect beneficiaries' preferences and their trust in nursing home services. A core contribution is to test for convergence or divergence between these two outcomes. The paper's strengths include its fine-grained analysis of the design dimensions of regulation. It shows that the effect of regulation on trust is not monolithic; it depends on which specific regulatory attribute (e.g., ownership, transparency) is being considered. This leads to a multi-modal categorization: when regulatory designs like non-profit ownership are considered, the study finds that they increase both trust and preference, suggesting a reinforcing, positive dynamic between regulation and trust; however, other regulatory tools like certain forms of information disclosure or oversight body types are found to matter less for trust, even if they matter for preferences, which implies a potentially decoupled relationship. While both Li et al. (this volume) and this study use a similar methodology to analyze trust and regulation at the individual level, their contributions highlight different facets of the nexus: Li et al. focus on how an overarching regulatory context influences the type of trust that is prioritized, whereas Pérez-Durán et al. focus on how specific regulatory attributes of a service lead to different, and sometimes non-convergent, outcomes for trust and preferences.

Gómez Díaz, Pikos, Houlberg Salomonsen, and Guaschino (this volume) examine the formation of trust in regulatory agencies, addressing gaps concerning both stakeholder trust and the role of the media vis-à-vis regulators. Drawing on multi-actor, cross-national, and temporal survey data, they analyze the influence of direct contact frequency between stakeholders and agencies, as well as the sentiment of media coverage, on the perceived trustworthiness of regulatory agencies. The findings suggest that media coverage, rather than direct contact, is the more significant driver of trust, with negative coverage undermining it and positive or neutral coverage fostering it. Furthermore, the analysis does not reveal statistically significant moderating effects—contrary to expectations that the relationship between newspaper coverage sentiment and stakeholders' perceived trust would be stronger among those with infrequent direct contacts, and weaker among those with frequent contacts with the agency. The paper highlights a reinforcing dynamic (positive media builds trust) but also hints at undermining dynamics (negative media erodes trust). Its focus on the media's role as an intermediary in shaping stakeholder trust in regulatory agencies, distinguishing between direct contact and mediated information, offers an underexplored perspective.

Latusek, Pikos, Six, and Wardaszko (this volume) focus on validating a scale for citizen trust in regulatory agencies, using Poland as a real-world case of a transitioning society with a historically low-trust environment. While primarily a methodological contribution, this paper directly engages with—and informs—the distinct dimensions of trustworthiness in our framework and the wider literature. Through a quantitative study, it validates a pre-existing

scale in a new cultural and institutional setting, distinct from controlled experimental contexts or more stable institutional settings. Through qualitative focus groups, however, the findings suggest the need to replace “benevolence” with “impartiality” for public institutions such as regulatory agencies, to better reflect the wider breadth of responsibilities and expectations associated with such institutions. This paper is foundational for accurately measuring trust in regulatory contexts, which is a prerequisite for any comparative analysis of trust-regulation relationships.

Finally, Rangoni (this volume) analyzes how trust in the European financial regulatory regime was repaired after the 2008 crisis, which marked a profound erosion of regime trust. Regulatory failure led to a sharp decline in confidence, risking a spiral into a vicious cycle for both regulation and trust. Yet this cycle was reversed by a regulatory response that enabled trust to rebound. Drawing on management literature, Rangoni examines trust repair mechanisms in terms of regulatory action (e.g., public investigations, substantive reforms, transparency initiatives) as well as institutional design (i.e., institutional reforms). He finds that, together, these responses played a crucial role in restoring stakeholders’ confidence, showcasing a shift from an undermining type (where failures eroded trust) to a reinforcing type (where regulatory responses restored it). Focusing on the systemic level, the paper demonstrates how targeted regulatory action can reverse negative trends and initiate a virtuous cycle. Compared to the cross-sectoral but more static and structural account of reinforcing types by Verhoest et al. (this volume), Rangoni zooms in on one sector to trace a multi-type shift, illustrating how types can transition or even reverse.

Concluding Remarks: A Framework for Cumulative Knowledge-Building

This volume’s findings challenge conventional wisdom characterising trust-regulation relationships in negative, static, and simplistic terms. First, our collective findings suggest that the relationship between trust and regulation is not necessarily a trade-off. Contrary to traditional, pessimistic views, the papers in this collection reveal that while substitutive or undermining dynamics are possible, the relationship can often be complementary or even mutually reinforcing. For example, studies in the volume show that specific regulatory designs and behaviour can bring about trust among actors, which in turn strengthens the regulatory regime itself. In broad-brush terms and leaving nuances aside, research suggests that regulation and trust interact in positive ways, complementing and reinforcing each other, more easily in those instances where:

- (a) regulatory regimes are more pluricentric and society-based, functioning as a decentred network with checks and balances (in contrast to a very centralised, purely state-dominated regime);
 - (b) regulatory organisations and officials are (perceived as being) open, transparent, accountable, competent, fair and focused on the balanced interests of society (in contrast to closed, captured, unaccountable organisations and officials);
 - (c) when regulatory strategies, instruments and content are (co-)designed in a responsive, empowering, dialogue-oriented and adaptive way, leaving a degree of discretionary space but with sufficient legal certainty; and
 - (d) when regulatory enforcement is enacted in a cooperative, respectful, context-sensitive and learning-oriented way (in contrast to overly strict, uniform and sanction-oriented enforcement).
- Such trust in the regulatory regime, in turn, is likely to aid regulatory effectiveness as well as

legitimacy. Rather than a choice between one or the other, therefore, effective and legitimate governance often relies on the synergistic combination of trust and regulation (see also Levi-Faur 2026).

In a static view, existing levels of (social, institutional, and inter-actor) trust indeed condition the initial choice of a specific regulatory architecture, strategy, and content. And indeed, the initial choice of a specific regulatory architecture or strategy signals a certain level of trust from regulators in regulatees or other actors. But our findings both complement and challenge such static accounts, demonstrating that trust-regulation relationships are often dynamic. Thus, most contributions are multi-modal, showing that a relationship can shift across types over time. For instance, we have learnt that the viability of promising regulatory strategies fostering voluntary compliance depend on (partly) exogenous conditions such as the level of polarization in a given society. But we have also learnt that governments can (and should) avoid low trust spiralling into harder-to-manage distrust, provided they engage with dismissive citizens early enough. Crucially, even after major trust breakdowns, undermining cycles can be reversed—through investigations, reforms, and transparency—leading to positive, reinforcing dynamics.

Finally, we have learnt that trust-regulation relationships are far from simple and monolithic; they are often complex, context-dependent and contingent upon the specific dimensions of trust and regulation being considered. For example, trust at different levels (e.g., interpersonal vs. institutional) and between different actors (e.g., citizen-state vs. inter-organizational) evolves through different logics, which in turn affects regulatory design and implementation differently. Critically, the relationship between trust and regulation is very much shaped by what is being (dis)trusted and by whom. To illustrate this complexity: citizens might distrust the regime's intentions, while regulatees may doubt inspectors' competence or benevolence. These varying trust configurations produce different responses to the same regulatory strategy. Similarly, an unclear regulatory design may substitute for one type of trust (e.g., integrity-based) but not another, and some regulatory attributes may reinforce trust while others remain decoupled from it. A nuanced understanding of these complex, contingent relationships is thus critical for effective and legitimate regulatory governance in complex societies.

This collection, viewed through our multi-layered framework, demonstrates the richness of the trust–regulation nexus, highlighting its often positive, dynamic, and complex nature. By linking general types of trust–regulation relationships (decoupled, substitutive, undermining, complementary, reinforcing) to their specific levels, designs, and actions, the framework advances a more precise and cumulative research agenda. In doing so, it not only identifies areas of convergence but also reveals critical gaps and nuanced conditionalities, thereby setting the stage for future inquiry and, we hope, directly shaping the agenda for both regulatory scholarship and practice.

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