

Who trusts the pollsters?



Robert Worcester, Roger Mortimore & Mark Gill

WAPOR Conference, June 2018

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Who doesn't?

- Committees
- All committees A-Z
- Lords Select
- Political Polling and Digital Media**
- Role
- Membership
- News**
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Lords Select Committee

Professor John Curtice and pollsters face questions on regulation



04 December 2017

Professor John Curtice, President of the British Polling Council and BBC election night maven, and his BPC Management Committee colleague Simon Atkinson give evidence to the House of Lords Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media.

- Parliament TV: Political Polling and Digital Media
- Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media

More Parliament news

- Five short debates in the Lords
- Lords debates Police and Crime Commissioners
- Lords debates challenges facing disabled people
- National Quantum Technologies Programme examined
- Prime Minister's Questions: 27 June 2018
- The hidden "Her-Story" of Parliament told in landmark exhibition
- Offensive Weapons Bill: Commons second reading
- UK must be bold in its defence of the rules-based international order
- Urgent question on privately financed prisons: 27 June 2018
- Future of chemical regulation investigated by Committee

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Who doesn't?



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- **High profile “failures” of polls at election “predictions” in several countries**
- **Hostile media coverage of polls**
- **Academic attacks on polls, with some suggestion of pollsters’ lacking integrity**
- **Politicians’ attacks on polls**

- 1. How much does the public trust pollsters?**
- 2. Is trust in pollsters linked to trust in other groups?**
- 3. What evidence is there of declining trust in pollsters?**
- 4. Does distrust in pollsters increase after poor election “predictions”?**
- 5. Who distrusts pollsters?**

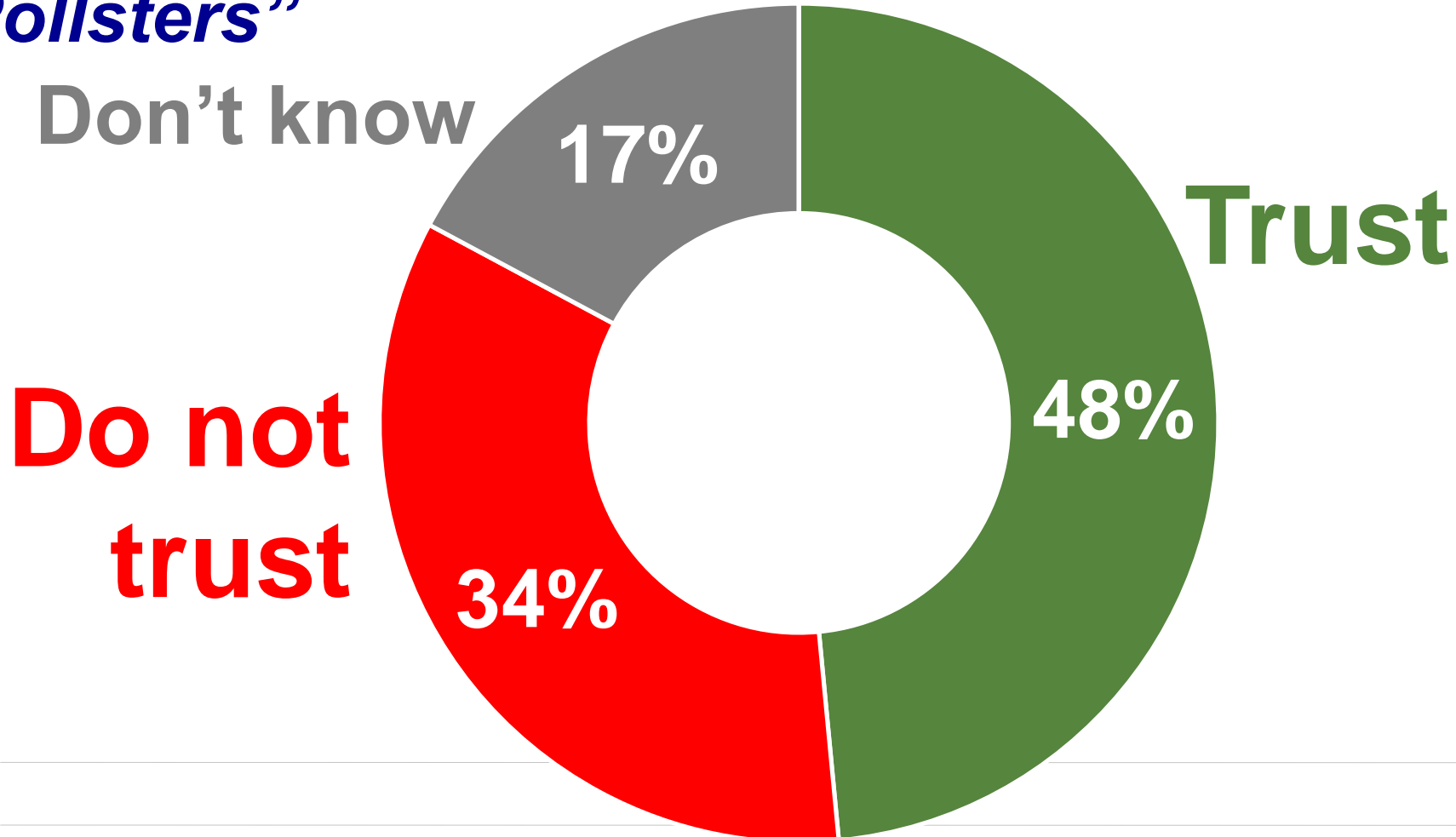
This presentation is based on evidence in Britain

- Representative quota samples of adults in Britain
- Q. *“Now I will read you a list of different types of people. For each would you tell me if you generally trust them to tell the truth or not.”*
- First poll by MORI in 1983, but first including “pollsters” on the list in 1993: 17 waves (n= 27,320)
- Respondent-level data available since 1997
- Most waves administered in face-to-face Omnibus surveys
- Data includes demographic, geographic, political information

1. How much are pollsters trusted? How does this compare with trust in other groups?

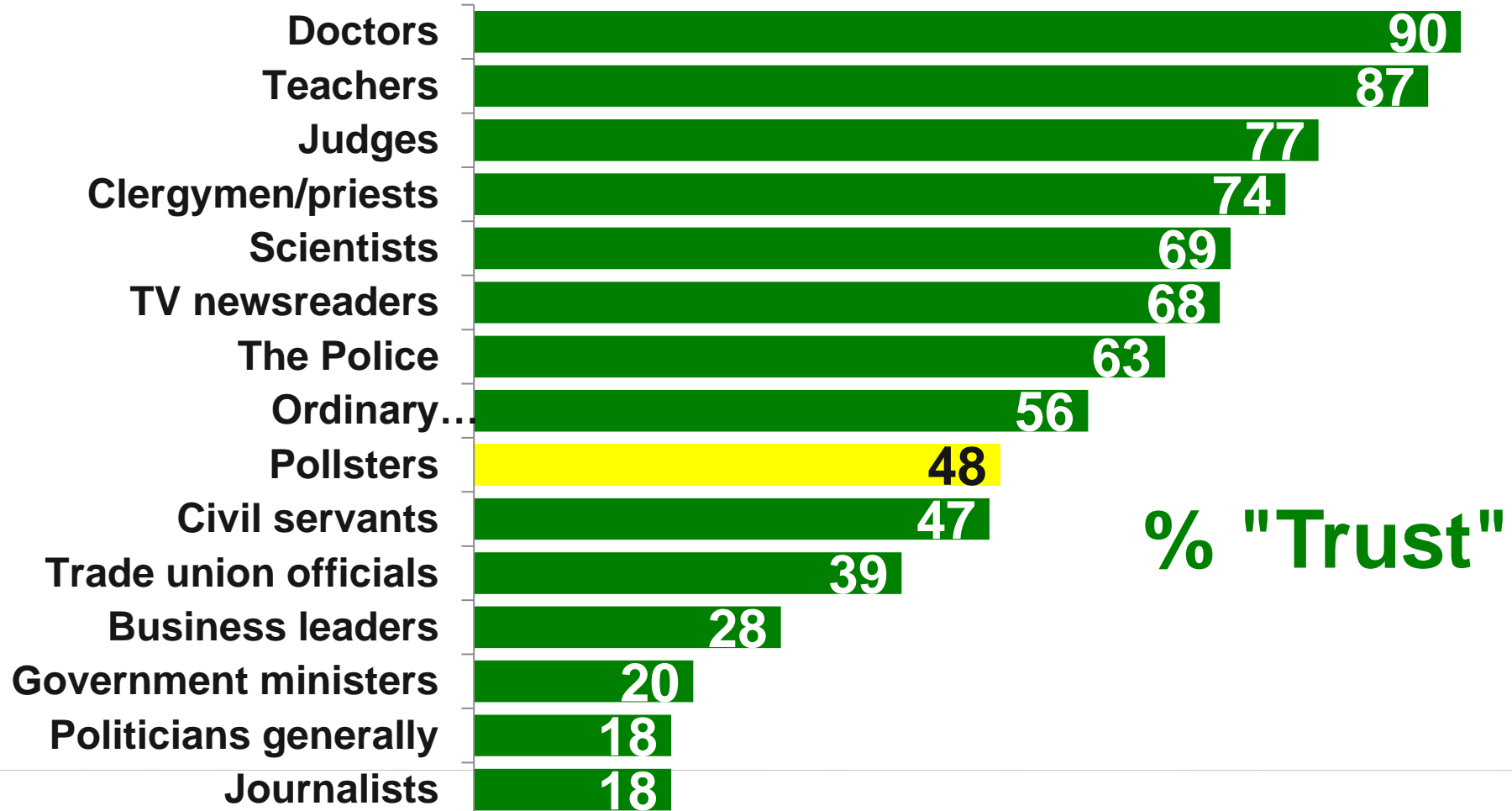
Trust in pollsters 1987-2017

Q. "Now I will read you a list of different types of people. For each would you tell me if you generally trust them to tell the truth or not:
Pollsters"



Trust in professions 1997-2017

Q. "Now I will read you a list of different types of people. For each would you tell me if you generally trust them to tell the truth or not."



Findings (1)

- **More people trust pollsters than not**
- **Many more people trust pollsters than trust journalists or politicians (*the groups who most frequently attack the pollsters*)**
- **Fewer people trust pollsters than trust scientists (*another expert group*)**
- **Almost everybody trusts doctors and teachers (*who they have probably met*) ... but also judges (*who they probably haven't*)**
- **Trust in pollsters is the same as trust in civil servants**

2. Is trust in pollsters linked to trust in other groups or independent from it?

Trust in pollsters v comparators

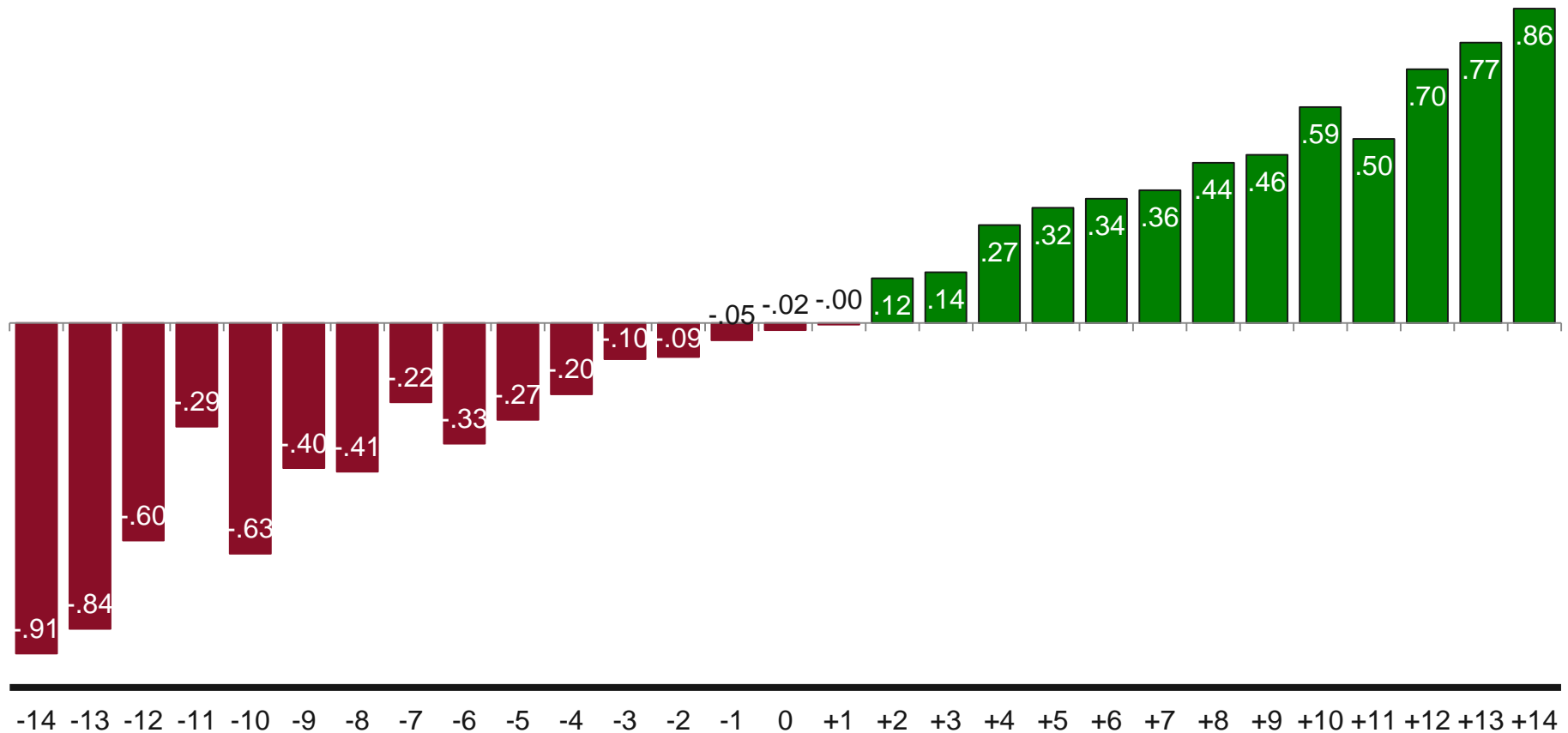
- **Code trust in each group for every respondent as:**
 - +1 for “trust”**
 - 0 for “don’t know”**
 - 1 for “do not trust”**

- **Calculate total comparator trust score for every respondent as the sum of the 14 individual group trust scores (i.e. not including pollsters)**

Runs from -14 to +14

Trust in pollsters v comparators

Mean score (+1 to -1) on trust in pollsters by total score on trust in comparators



Findings (2)

- A statistically-significant positive relationship between trust in pollsters and “general trust” (i.e. total trust score for 14 others)

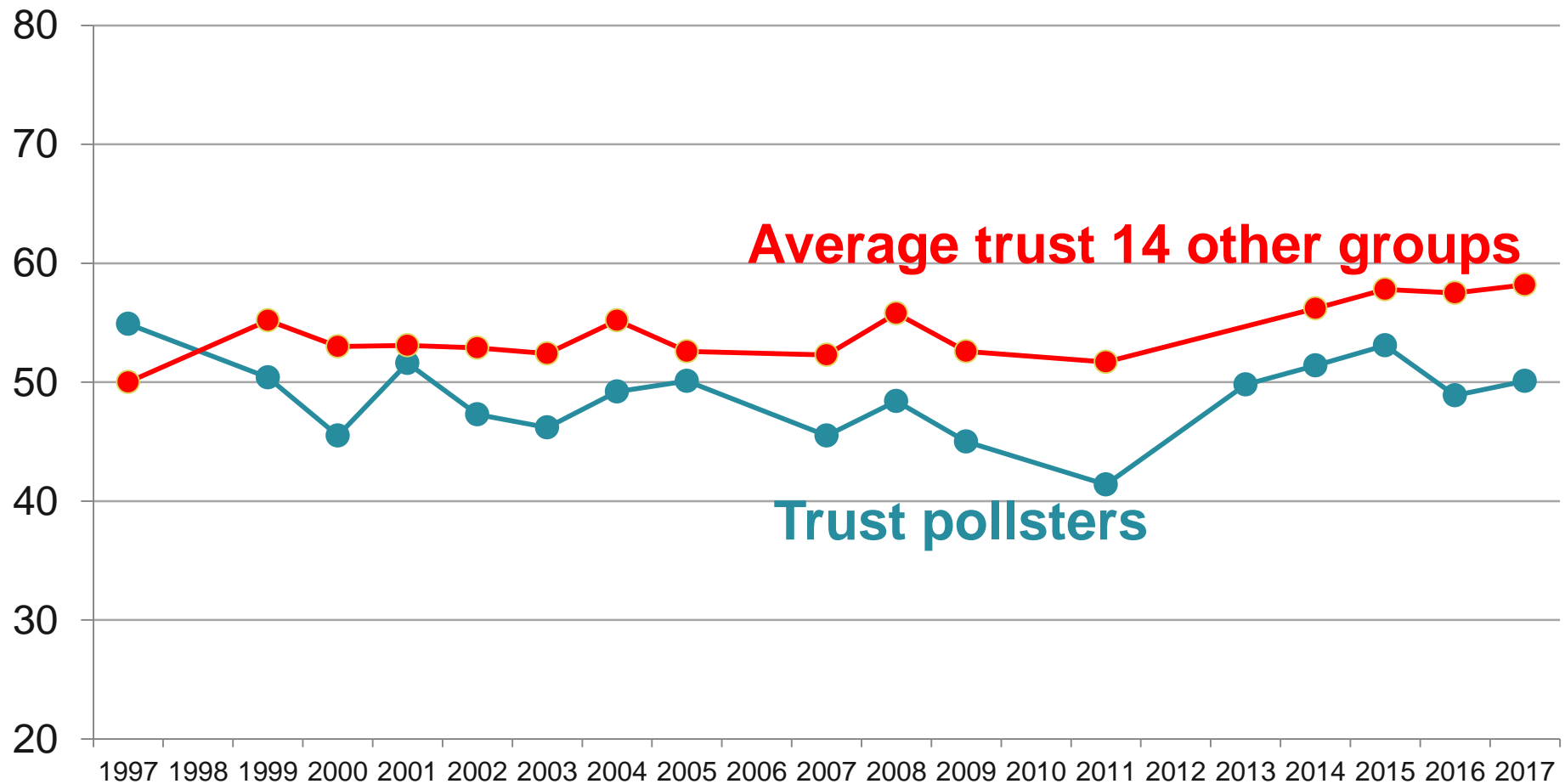
Also (we will spare you the details)

- A statistically-significant positive relationship between trust in pollsters and each of the 14 individual comparator groups
- In a multi-variate model, every single comparator group except “government ministers” makes a significant independent contribution to the model
 - “Government ministers” are significant if “politicians in general” are omitted

3. What evidence is there of declining trust in pollsters?

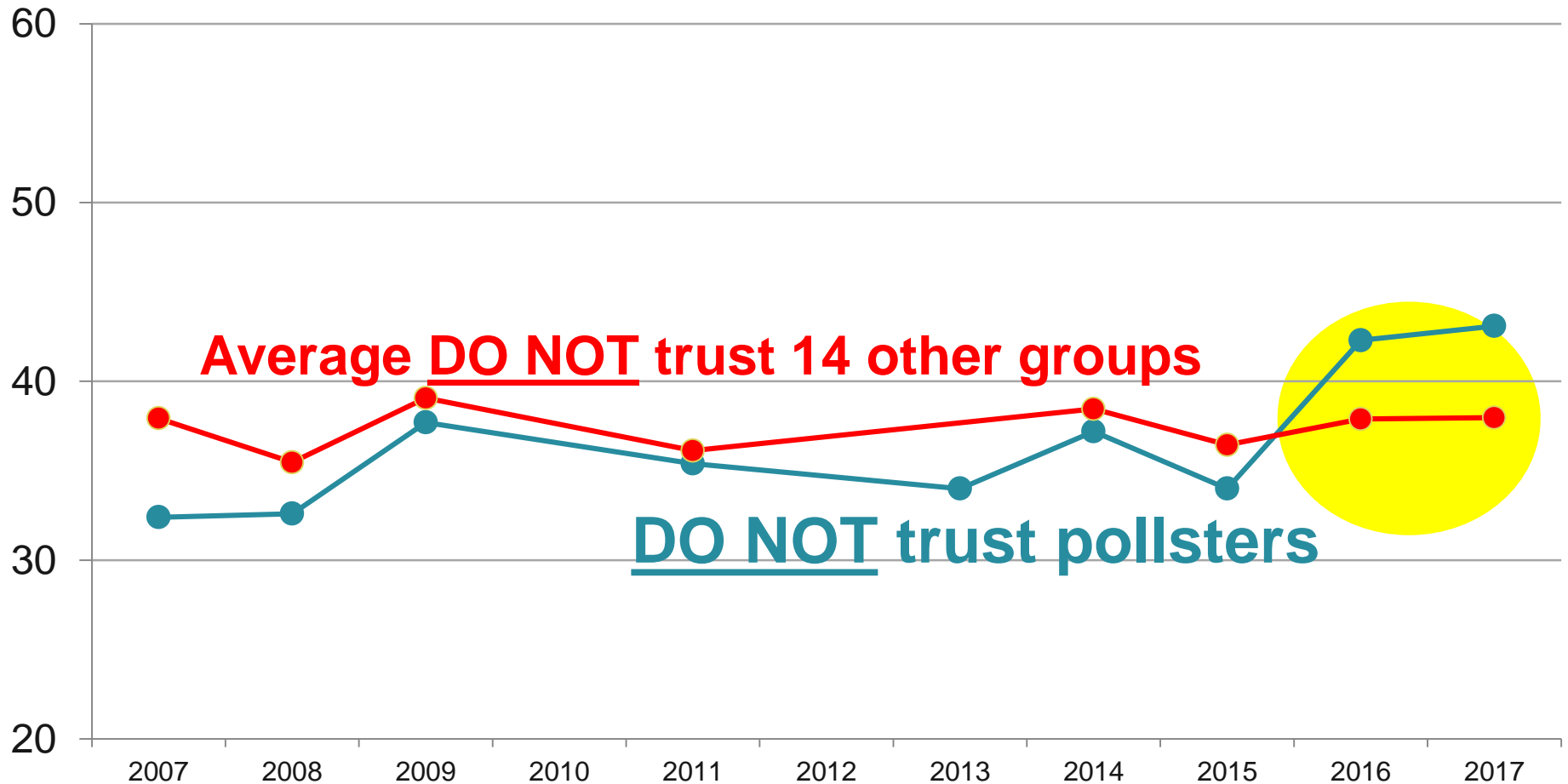
Trust (positive answers) 1997-2017

Q. "Now I will read you a list of different types of people. For each would you tell me if you generally trust them to tell the truth or not?"



Distrust 2007-2017

Q. “Now I will read you a list of different types of people. For each would you tell me if you generally trust them to tell the truth or not?”



Findings (3)

- **No evidence of either a short-term or long-term decline in positive trust in pollsters**
- **Trust in pollsters has remained in step with comparators**
- **Levels of trust in pollsters consistently reflects more general levels of trust, and are not distinct to pollsters**

Findings (4)

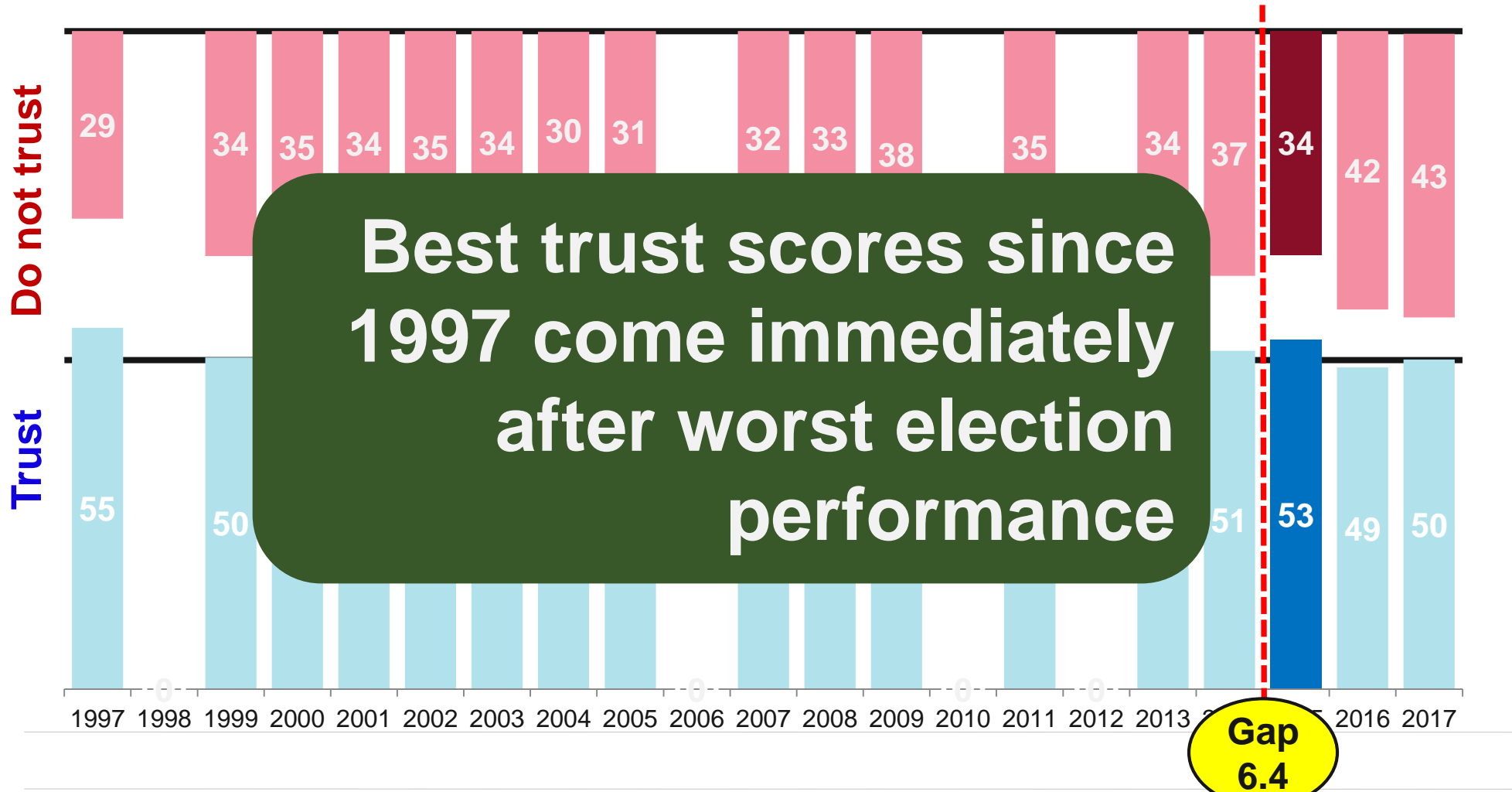
- **However, distrust in pollsters has risen markedly**
 - This is a swing from “don’t know”, not from “trust”
 - This is distinctive to attitudes to pollsters: there is no corresponding move in distrust of the comparator groups
- **Biggest change was first evident in the Oct/Nov 2016 poll, and sustained in the 2017 poll**
 - ? **Timing consistent with the Trump/fake news rhetoric around the 2016 US presidential election**
 - ? **It can’t reflect the RESULT of the 2016 election (poll fieldwork ended 1 November)**
 - ? **Brexit?**

4. Does distrust in pollsters increase after poor election “predictions”?

- **Six UK general elections: 1997 – 2017**
- **Poll performance in 2015 and 2017 widely attacked**
- **Two referendums: 2014 (Scotland), 2016 (Brexit)**
- **Measure poll “gap” as difference on lead (first party over second party) between poll of polls and result**
- **Gap ranged from 0.9 (2010) to 7.3 (2016)**

Trust in pollsters 1997-2017

Q. Now I will read you a list of different types of people. For each would you tell me if you generally trust them to tell the truth or not: **Pollsters**



Findings (5)

- **No sign that objectively poor election “predictions” immediately damage trust in pollsters**
- **2015 election had the worst “prediction” performance for an election (second-worst including referendums)**
- **Media fuss was probably greatest after 2015 election, yet trust scores in the 2015 poll (post-election) were the best in years**
- **Possible poll performances or media coverage of them have a cumulative effect (four criticised performances in 4 years before 2017 poll)**

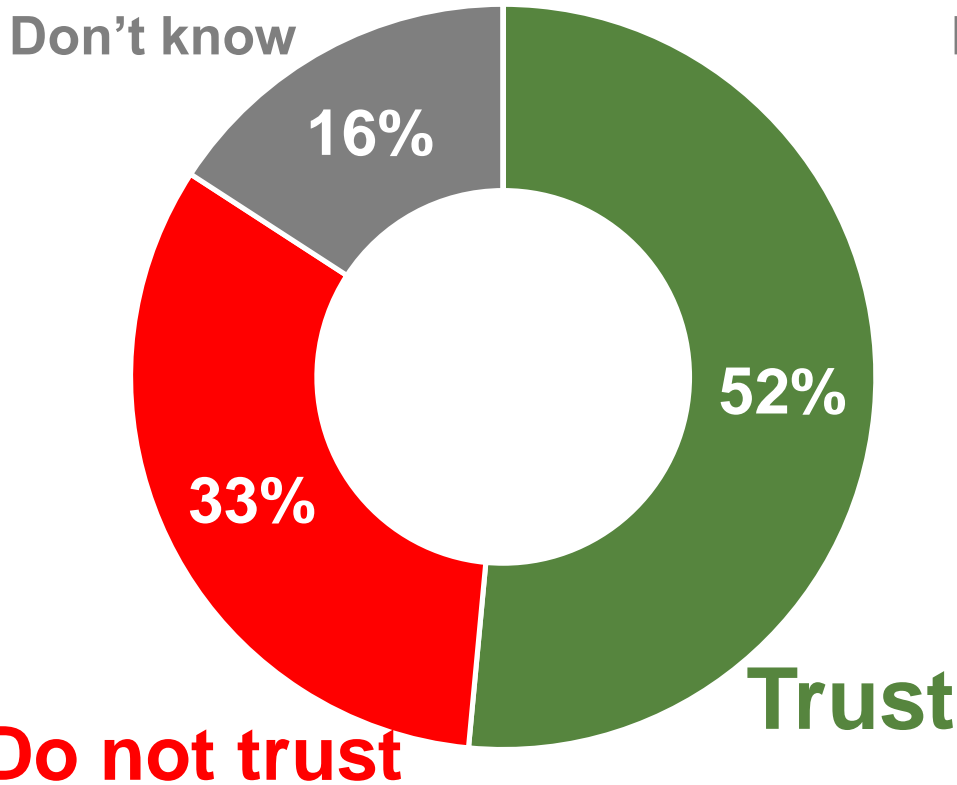
5. Who distrusts pollsters?

(i) Univariate

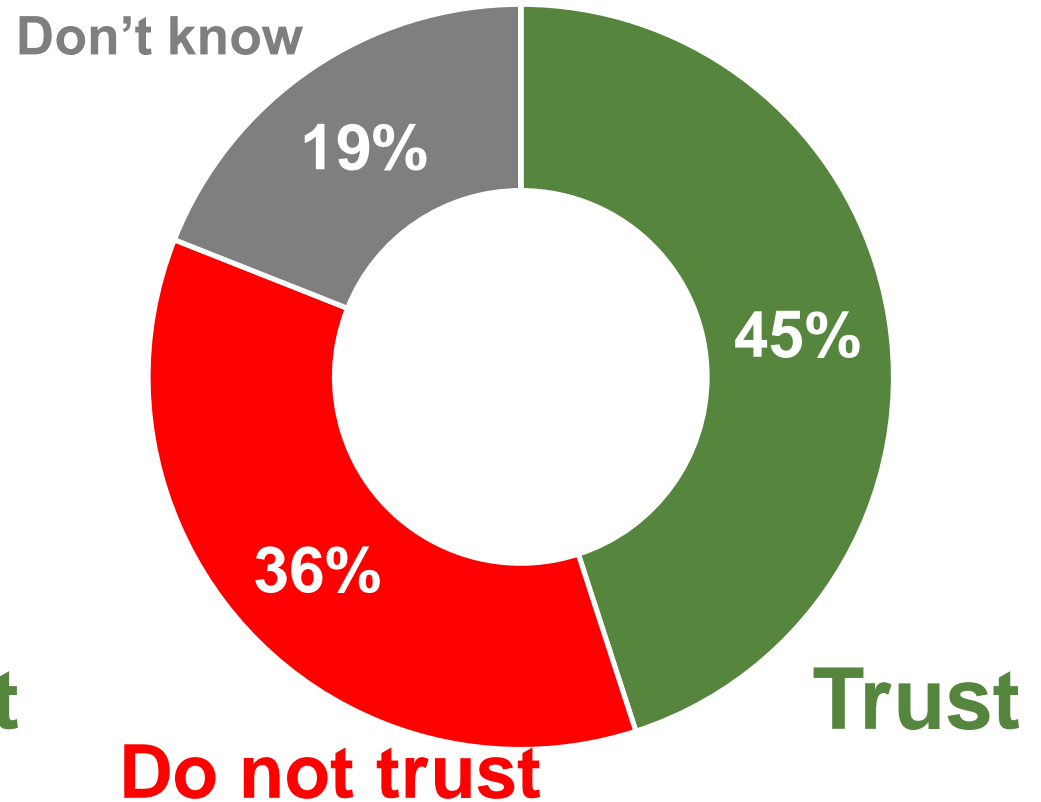
Trust in pollsters by sex

Q. "Now I will read you a list of different types of people. For each would you tell me if you generally trust them to tell the truth or not: **Pollsters**"

Men

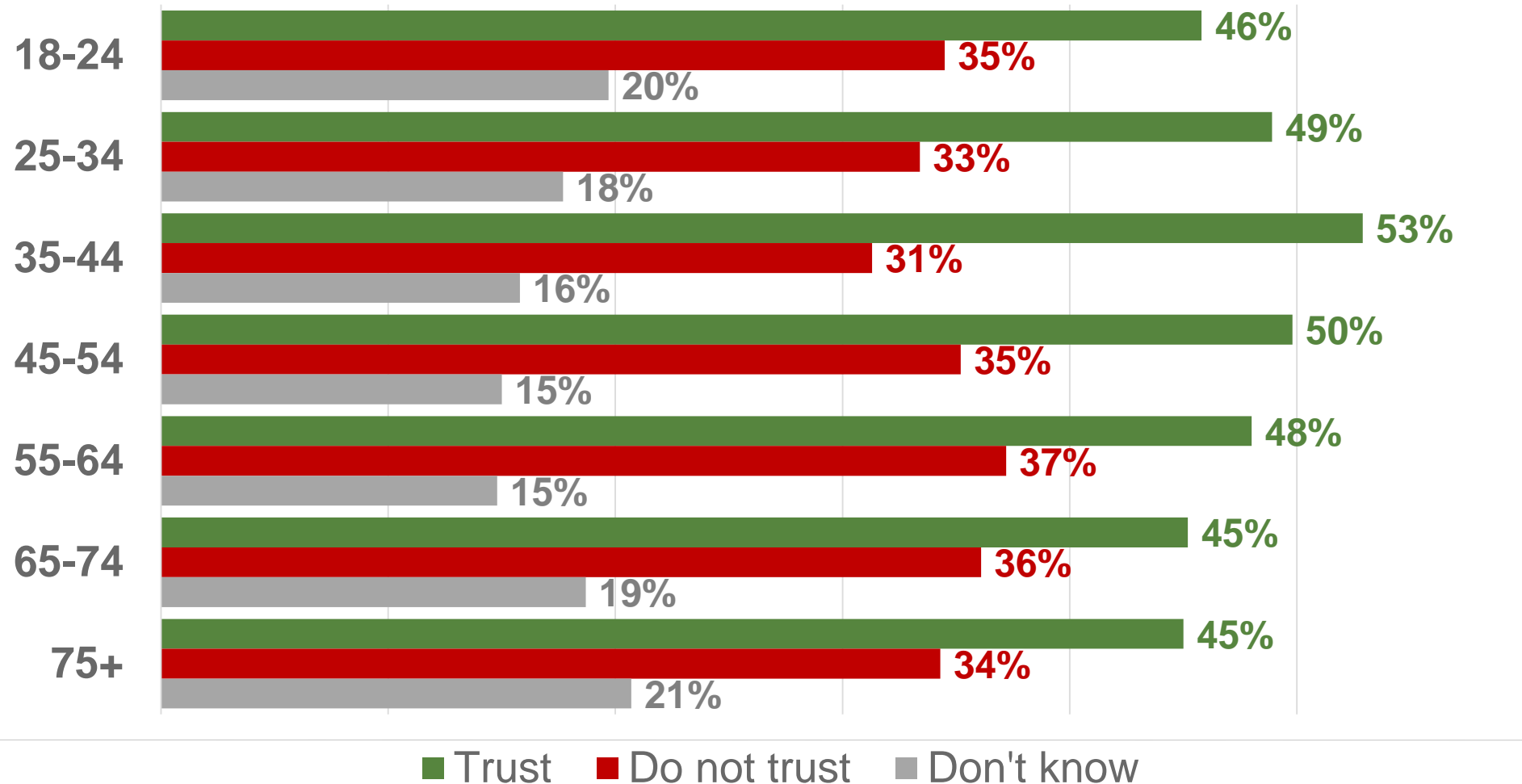


Women



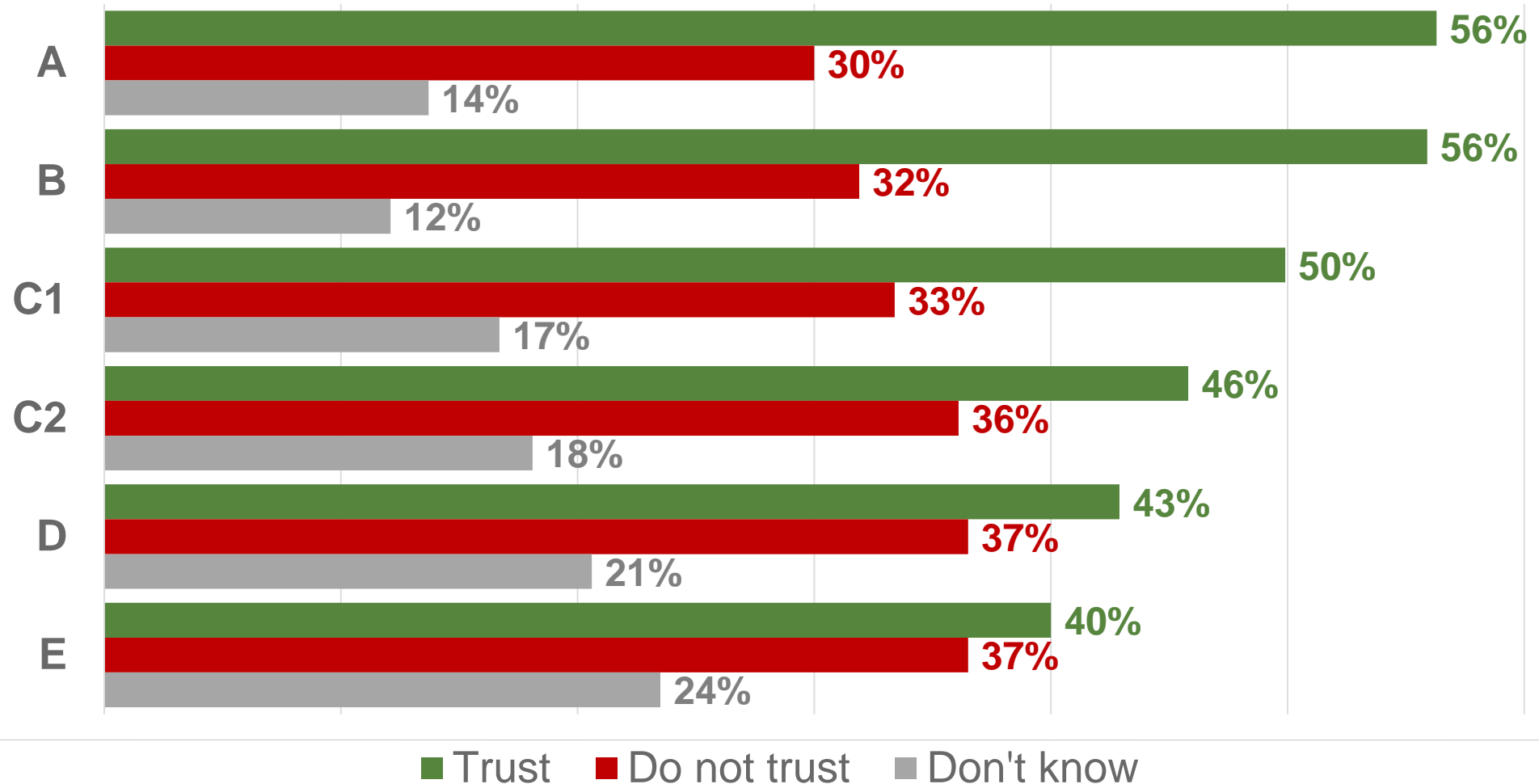
Trust in pollsters by age

Q. "Now I will read you a list of different types of people. For each would you tell me if you generally trust them to tell the truth or not: **Pollsters**"



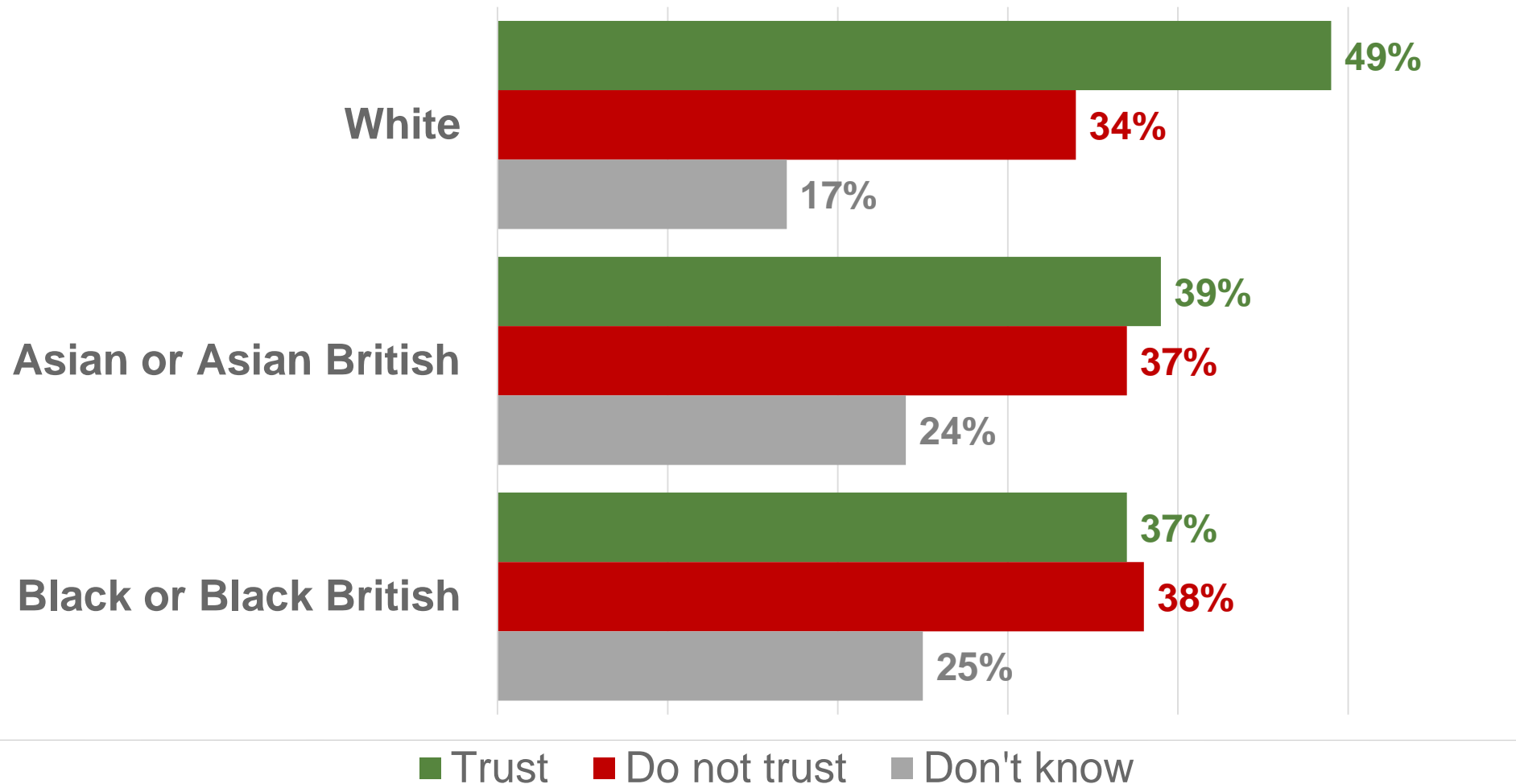
Trust in pollsters by social grade

Q. "Now I will read you a list of different types of people. For each would you tell me if you generally trust them to tell the truth or not: **Pollsters**"



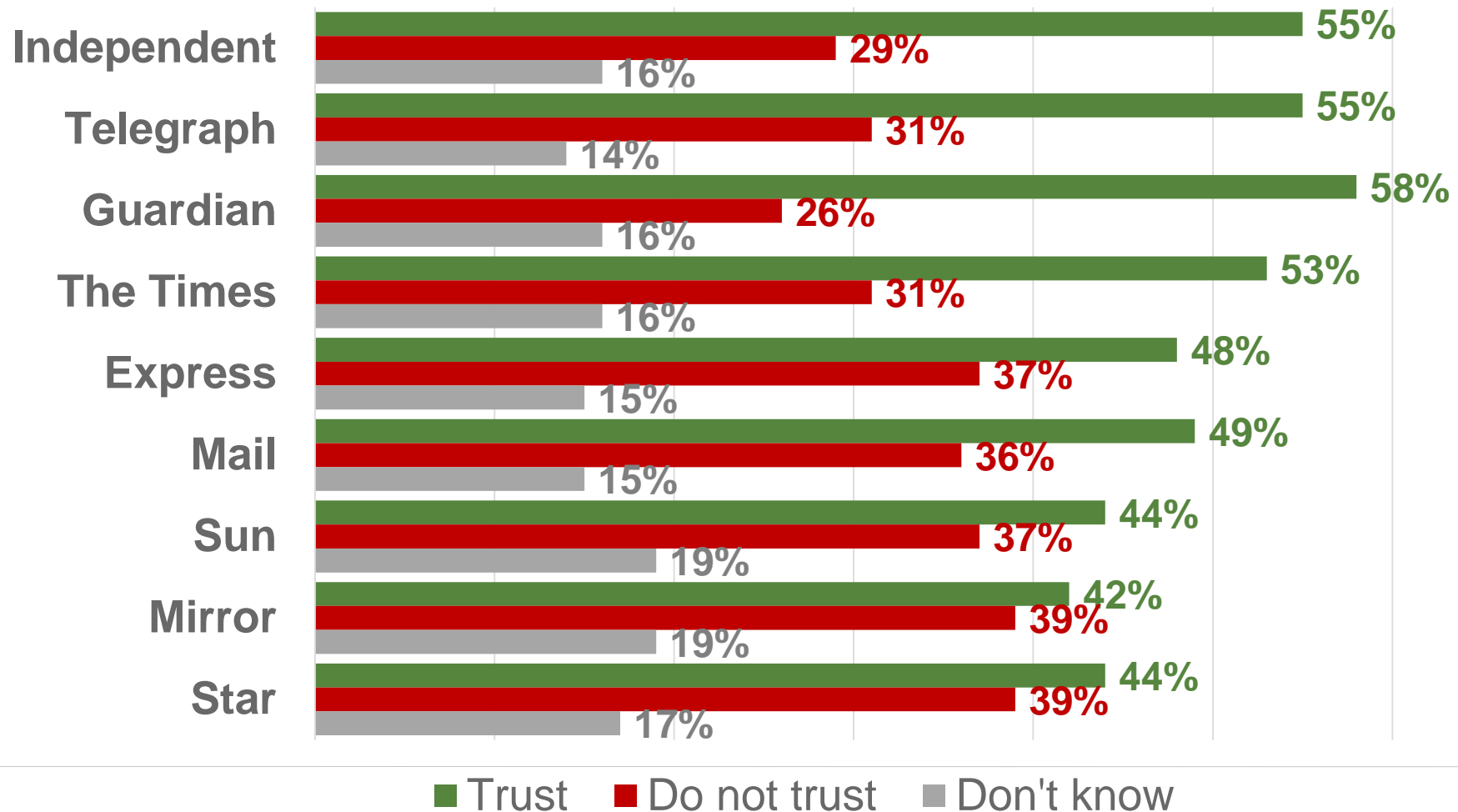
Trust in pollsters by ethnic group

Q. "Now I will read you a list of different types of people. For each would you tell me if you generally trust them to tell the truth or not: **Pollsters**"



Trust in pollsters by readership

Q. "Now I will read you a list of different types of people. For each would you tell me if you generally trust them to tell the truth or not: **Pollsters**"



5. Who distrusts pollsters?

(ii) Multivariate

Who distrusts pollsters?

- A binary logistic regression to find out which factors were linked with distrust in pollsters (controlling for everything else)
- Each of the following were independently significant
 - Gender (women more distrustful)
 - Tenure (mortgage holders least distrustful)
 - Social grade (C2s most distrustful)
 - Age (45-64 year olds most distrustful)
 - Education (higher qualifications less distrustful)
 - Region (lots of differences)

Who distrusts pollsters?

- However, explanatory power of this model VERY low (Nagelkerke pseudo R-sq=0.015, i.e. Explaining about 1.5% of the variance)
- We added interview date to the model:
 - Those interviewed 2016-17 were much more distrusting than the rest (odds ratio 1.55)
 - Those interviewed 2007-15 were somewhat more distrusting than those interviewed earlier

i.e. There is significant evidence of a recent increase in distrust

Who distrusts pollsters?

- We controlled for the combined trust scores for the comparator groups (to see what is distinctive about distrust in pollsters)
- This substantially increased the power of the model
- But many of the demographic differences were no longer significant (**i.e. they were differences in general trust levels, not specific to pollsters**)
- Distrust in other groups is a powerful predictor of distrust in pollsters
- Higher distrust in 2016-17 remains significant

Who distrusts pollsters?

- Adding in newspaper readership, testing for influence of reading each individual title (still controlling for general trust & demogs)
- No significant effect for most newspapers
- Significantly higher distrust among *Sun* and *Mirror* readers
 - Both popular tabloids, different political slants
 - Higher distrust in 2016-17 remains significant
- Significantly lower distrust among *Guardian* readers
- No significant difference in distrust by party allegiance (up to 2008)
- **There remains a significant 2016/17 effect:** not just a general increase of distrust in those years

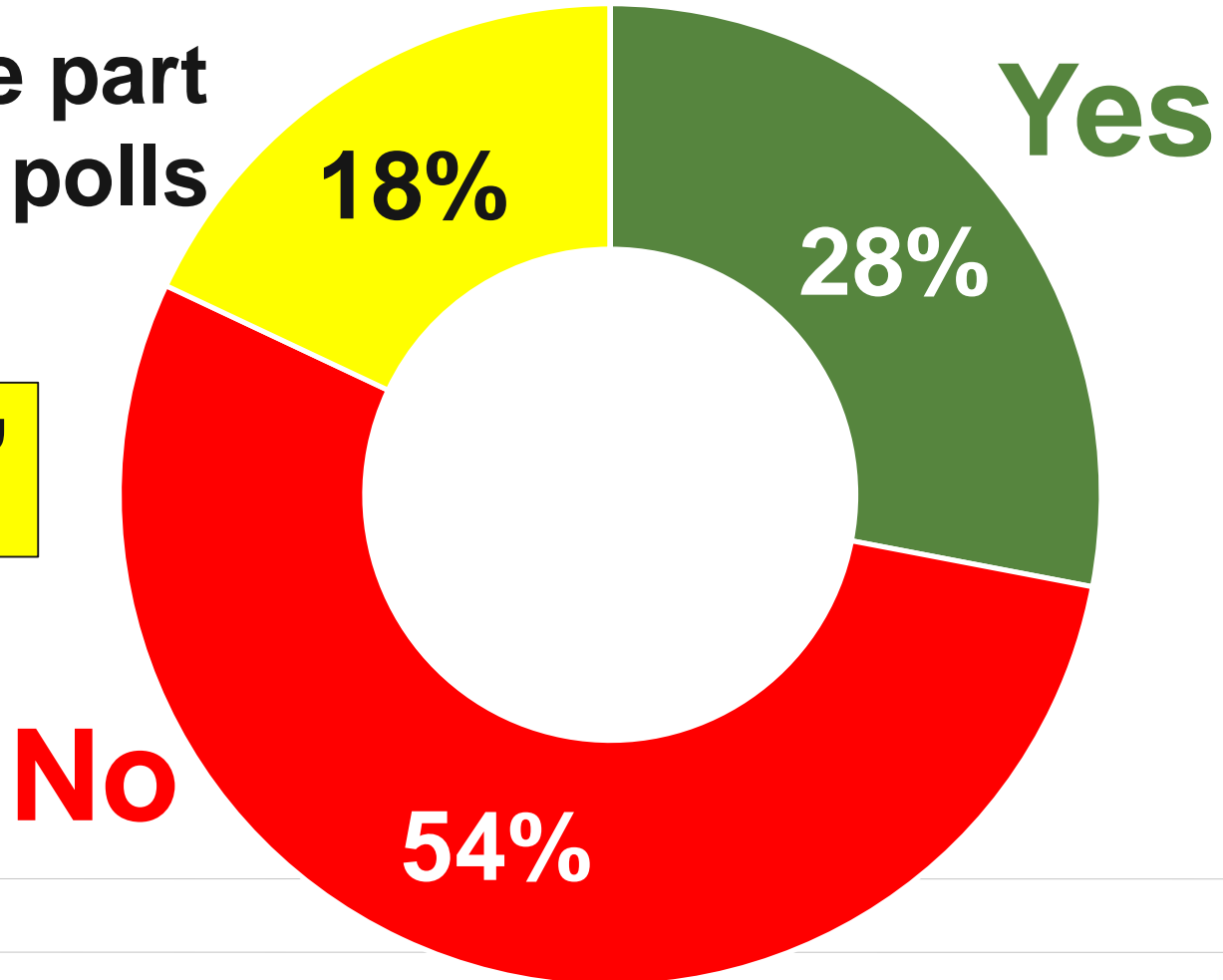
- Pollsters are still more widely trusted than distrusted in GB
- Trust is highest among the groups who are most knowledgeable about and take most interest in politics
- Currently slightly more **distrust** of pollsters than is usual in GB
 - Not a weakening of existing trust – increase of distrust among those who previously had no opinion
 - Trump/fake news effect?
 - Reaction to coverage of British election polling?
- Newspaper coverage is probably not an important direct cause
 - Any political aspect probably populist v establishment rather than right v left

“Should polls be banned?”

- Q “*Matt Chorley’s Red Box (18 April 2018) The Times*”
- 1,390 readers answered online

I never take part
in polls

“Really?”



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