

TARTU UNIVERSITY
Faculty of Social Sciences
Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies

Karolin Allikas

POLITICAL ATTITUDES AND TRUST IN BIG TECH COMPANIES: A CROSS-
EUROPEAN ANALYSIS OF CITIZENS' CONFIDENCE IN GAFAM

MA thesis

Supervisor: Piret Ehin, PhD

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Authorship Declaration

I have prepared this thesis independently. All of the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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Abstract

This thesis examines how political attitudes shape citizens' trust in Big Tech companies across the European Union. Big Tech companies influence communication, access to information and political life, thus understanding how citizens evaluate these firms has become an important political question. Previous research has looked at trust in digital corporations through consumer behaviour. This thesis analyses trust in Big Tech from a political science perspective. The theoretical framework is built on the idea that political trust extends to the public sphere. It focuses on three predictors: left-right ideological self-placement, satisfaction with democracy, and trust in political institutions. The dependent variable is a composite index of trust in five GAFAM companies – Google (Alphabet), Amazon, Facebook (Meta), Apple, and Microsoft. The analysis uses cross-national survey data from 15 EU member states and over 22,000 respondents, collected in Autumn 2024 as part of the Horizon Europe INCA project (Ehin et al., 2024). The empirical analysis includes Pearson correlation analysis, OLS regression with and without sociodemographic and country-level controls, a moderation analysis, and country-specific regressions.

The findings demonstrate that trust in political institutions is the strongest and most consistent predictor of trust in GAFAM companies across all countries and model specifications. This finding supports the existence of a spillover mechanism between political and technological trust. Ideological self-placement also significantly predicts trust in GAFAM, with right-leaning respondents exhibiting higher levels of trust. The relationship follows a U-shaped pattern, with respondents at both ideological extremes reporting higher trust than those in the political centre. Furthermore, the relationship between ideology and trust in GAFAM is significantly moderated by age – ideological effects are stronger among younger respondents. Satisfaction with democracy shows a weaker, more context-dependent relationship, becoming statistically significant only after accounting for country-level differences.

The thesis contributes to political science by linking the institutional trust literature with public attitudes toward digital corporations. The findings support the idea that trust in Big Tech is, among other factors, also shaped by perceptions toward political authority and governance. These results have implications for EU digital governance, regulatory legitimacy, and public communication strategies surrounding platform regulation.

Table of contents

Abbreviations.....	5
Introduction.....	6
1. Corporate Trust and Its Determinants	10
1.1. Digital Capitalism and Beyond.....	10
1.2. Regulation of Big Tech.....	12
1.3. Conceptualising trust: political, institutional, corporate	16
1.3.1. Political and Institutional Trust	16
1.3.2. Trust in Big Tech.....	18
1.4. Political Attitudes and Trust in Big Tech	20
2. Data and Methodology	25
2.1. Data and Operationalisation.....	25
2.1.1. Data	25
2.1.2. Operationalisation of variables	27
2.2 . Methodology	31
3. The Effect of Political Attitudes on Trust in GAFAM.....	33
3.1. Descriptive Statistics.....	33
3.2. Bivariate Analysis.....	38
3.3. Multivariate analysis.....	42
3.4. Country-Specific Effects of Political Attitudes on Trust in GAFAM	50
Conclusion	54
Bibliography	59
Appendices.....	64

Abbreviations

GAFAM – Google (Alphabet), Amazon, Facebook (Meta), Apple, Microsoft

EU – the European Union

US – the United States

GDPR – General Data Protection Regulation

DMA – the Digital Markets Act

DSA – the Digital Services Act

Introduction

Over the past two decades, the rapid expansion of digital technologies has transformed economic structures, political processes, and everyday social interactions within the European Union. Digital platforms now facilitate communication, commerce, and information access, leading to new types of economic organisation and political interactions. Large technology corporations – within this research, Google (Alphabet), Amazon, Facebook (Meta), Apple, and Microsoft, collectively known as GAFAM – are seen as dominant actors within this digital ecosystem. These companies provide essential digital infrastructure, including search engines, cloud computing, social media platforms, and online marketplaces, which individuals, businesses, and public institutions across Europe widely use. Their services have become deeply embedded in citizens' daily lives, shaping how information is accessed, shared, and consumed (Helberger et al., 2017).

The economic and political influence of these corporations has expanded alongside their technological reach. Big Tech companies possess vast amounts of personal data, control key digital markets, and play a central role in structuring the online information environment. This concentration of economic and informational power has raised concerns about market competition, privacy, democratic accountability, and political influence (Helberger et al., 2017). As digital platforms increasingly serve as intermediaries between citizens and political information, they also shape public discourse and influence democratic processes, raising important questions about legitimacy and governance in the digital age (Keskin, 2018).

Within the European Union, digital transformation has become closely linked to broader debates about economic sovereignty, regulatory authority, and the governance of global technology markets. Unlike traditional industries, digital markets are characterised by strong network effects, economies of scale, and high barriers to entry, which enable dominant firms to maintain their market position over time (Helberger et al., 2017). The rise of Big Tech has reshaped economic competition and the political relationships among governments, corporations, and citizens. Trust plays a central role in shaping how individuals perceive and interact with powerful institutions, including both political authorities and private corporations (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Norris, 2011). Citizens' trust in major technology firms influences their

willingness to share personal data, adopt digital services, and support regulatory policies aimed at governing digital markets.

The question of trust in Big Tech also has clear implications for democratic governance and political legitimacy. Trust functions as a key mechanism that enables cooperation between individuals and institutions in complex societies (Levi & Stoker, 2000). When citizens trust institutions and corporations, they are more likely to view them as legitimate actors. Conversely, low levels of trust may contribute to public scepticism and increased demands for political oversight and regulation (Norris, 2011). In the context of digital capitalism, where private corporations exercise significant influence over public communication and economic activity, understanding public trust becomes essential for assessing the legitimacy of both corporate and regulatory authority (Helberger et al., 2017).

Beyond its domestic implications, the regulation of Big Tech has also become a significant geopolitical issue. All major GAFAM corporations are headquartered in the United States, and their dominance in European digital markets reflects asymmetries in technological innovation and economic power between the United States and the European Union (Bradford, 2023). The EU's efforts to regulate these companies – including competition policy enforcement, digital market regulation, and taxation initiatives – have introduced new tensions into transatlantic economic relations (Bradford, 2023). These developments are closely linked to digital sovereignty, strategic autonomy, and the EU's ability to exercise regulatory authority over global technology firms operating within its jurisdiction (Bradford, 2023). Public trust in Big Tech companies is politically significant for domestic governance and for the EU's strategic position in the global digital economy. Media coverage and political discourse frequently highlight issues such as data privacy, misinformation and regulatory conflicts between the EU and the United States, further shaping public perceptions (Paryavi, 2025; Fenwick, 2025). Thus, trust in Big Tech may be influenced by both domestic political attitudes and how individuals interpret the role of these companies in transatlantic relations.

Despite the growing salience of public confidence in digital corporations, the determinants of citizens' trust in Big Tech remain understudied in political science research. Existing research has shown that digital platforms increasingly operate as infrastructures of communication, participation, and public life, raising problems of legitimacy, accountability, and public power (Taylor, 2021; van Dijck et al., 2018). However, less attention has been paid to the political foundations of citizens' trust in these corporations. Literature on trust in political science has

also rather focused on trust in political institutions, governments, and democratic systems (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Norris, 2011; Valgarðsson et al., 2025), without examining how those orientations extend to private actors in the digital economy. There remains a significant gap in research. As Big Tech companies have come to function as infrastructural actors intertwined with democratic life, citizens' trust in them is closely linked to how they perceive and relate to political authority. A small body of research suggests that political and institutional trust may 'spill over' into confidence in adjacent institutions and knowledge-based actors (Saarinen et al., 2020), and that political ideology shapes evaluations of corporations as well as of the state (De Bondt, 2013). These mechanisms have not been systematically tested in the context of Big Tech, and cross-national comparative evidence remains limited. This thesis addresses that gap directly. The objective of this thesis is to explain how political attitudes shape citizens' trust in Big Tech companies across the European Union. Specifically, it examines how individuals' political ideology, satisfaction with democracy, and trust in political institutions influence their level of trust in GAFAM firms.

The main research question is: **How do political ideology, satisfaction with democracy, and institutional trust influence citizens' trust in Big Tech companies in Europe?**

To address this research question, this thesis develops a theoretical framework that draws on the spillover model of institutional trust, the political sociology of ideological orientation, and the literature on corporate legitimacy in the digital sphere. Five hypotheses are derived from this framework. They predict that right-leaning ideology (H1), ideological extremism (H2), democratic satisfaction (H3), and trust in national and European institutions (H4, H4.1, H4.2) each independently shape trust in GAFAM. The last hypothesis predicts that the ideology-trust relationship is moderated by respondents' age (H5). These hypotheses are tested using a bivariate Pearson correlation analysis, ordinary least squares (OLS) regression with and without sociodemographic controls, a moderation analysis using the PROCESS macro, and country-specific regression models for all 15 national samples. The analysis begins with pooled cross-national models to identify overall patterns, and then shifts to country-level analyses. This allows for examining how these patterns differ across national political and institutional contexts.

The empirical analysis uses the *Public Perceptions of Big Tech Companies in Europe* dataset, produced as a part of the Horizon Europe-funded INCA project (Increase Corporate Political Responsibility and Accountability) (Ehin et al., 2024). The survey was conducted in Autumn

2024 by Norstat Eesti AS across 15 EU member states, with a total sample of 22,618 respondents. The dataset provides individual-level measures of trust in each of the five GAFAM companies, political ideology, democratic satisfaction, trust in four political institutions (national parliament, government, legal system, and the European Parliament), and necessary sociodemographic characteristics. Its cross-national scope makes it well-suited for the research question addressed in this thesis.

This thesis makes several contributions to the literature. First, it offers a systematic cross-national analysis of how political attitudes shape trust in Big Tech companies in Europe using a recent survey dataset covering 15 EU member states. Second, it connects the political trust literature with research on public attitudes toward digital corporations. In doing so, it shows whether institutional trust can extend into the private digital sphere. Third, it compares pooled models with country-specific regressions. This allows identification of both general European patterns and differences across national backgrounds. Finally, the moderation analysis adds a generational perspective. It shows whether the relationship between right-wing ideology and trust in GAFAM is stronger among younger respondents.

The thesis is divided into three main chapters. The first chapter focuses on the theoretical framework: conceptualising the main terms and keywords; an overview of theories of digital capitalism and legitimacy in the EU; and a literature review of political attitudes, ideology, and corporate perceptions. The second chapter presents the research data and methodology: an overview of the dataset and variables used; the operationalisation of key constructs; and statistical modelling and analytical procedures. The third chapter consists of the empirical analysis: an overview of trust levels across the European Union, regression results, and a discussion of cross-national variation.

1. Corporate Trust and Its Determinants

This chapter develops the thesis's theoretical framework by integrating relevant literature on citizens' trust in Big Tech companies. To begin with, it contextualises debates in theories of digital capitalism, focusing on the structural power of platform-based corporations and the future of fading lines between the state and the market in the European Union. By doing this, it addresses the question of legitimacy in a regulatory environment where private firms wield substantial influence over economic and communicative infrastructure. Second, it conceptualises trust by distinguishing political, institutional, and corporate trust, which helps answer how these forms of confidence relate to one another and how they operate in democratic societies. At the moment, most of the trust-related literature in political science focuses on trust in political institutions rather than in private corporations. This creates a big gap in the field, as big private corporations increasingly affect everyday lives. Lastly, the chapter draws on the existing literature on political attitudes, ideological self-placement, and views of corporations to identify the mechanisms by which the ideologies of the left and right, satisfaction with democracy, and trust in institutions can influence citizens' evaluations of Big Tech.

1.1. Digital Capitalism and Beyond

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has transformed economic structures and social interactions, leading to a “platform society” in which private corporations provide the essential infrastructure for public life (van Dijck et al., 2018). This shift is central to the theory of ‘digital capitalism’, characterised by the concentration of economic and informational power in a few dominant firms (Helberger et al., 2017). Online platforms function as socio-technical infrastructures that organise communication, economic exchange and social interaction through the continuous collection, processing and circulation of user data (Helberger et al., 2017). Rather than merely facilitating user interaction, these platforms actively structure markets and public communication by shaping how information is distributed and how economic activity is coordinated (Helberger et al., 2017). Through this, digital capitalism extends traditional capitalist dynamics into the digital sphere, where data, algorithms and network infrastructures become a central source of economic value. Scholars therefore emphasise that digital capitalism encompasses transformations in production processes, ownership structures, and labour relations associated with digital technologies (Pace, 2018). All together these developments demonstrate how contemporary capitalism increasingly relies

on digital infrastructures that enable global connectivity while also reinforcing new forms of corporate concentration and control.

Digital capitalism reshapes everyday life by embedding digital platforms into routine social and economic activities. As digital technologies expand, platforms start to mediate more of how individuals communicate, access information, shop, work, and participate in public discussions. In this system, services such as search engines, social media, cloud services and online marketplaces have become essential infrastructure through which people organise many aspects of daily life (van Dijck et al., 2018). These systems rely on the collection and analysis of user data, allowing companies to personalise content, target advertising, and optimise digital services based on behavioural patterns. While such processes can improve convenience and efficiency for users, they also mean that individuals' online activities become a key resource for economic value creation within digital capitalism (Pace, 2018). Everyday interactions, such as searching for information or sharing messages, are increasingly more important within ecosystems that monetise user behaviour. This shows how digital capitalism operates at the levels of markets and corporations and is also visible in the everyday practices of platform users. Therefore, individuals become both consumers and sources of economic value in digital environments that structure access to information, services, and opportunities (Helberger et al., 2017).

The concept of 'Big Tech' refers to a group of large technology corporations that have achieved dominant market positions across multiple digital sectors simultaneously. In this thesis, Big Tech is operationalised through the GAFAM grouping: Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft. What distinguishes these companies from conventional corporations is their size and the power that they have over the market. Each of these firms controls one or more platform ecosystems that function as essential mediators for economic activities, social communication, and information access at a global scale (Lindman et al., 2023). Google dominates web search and online advertising. Amazon controls one of the largest online shopping platforms and a major cloud computing business. Meta mediates social networking and digital communication. Apple controls a closed hardware-software ecosystem. Microsoft provides enterprise software and cloud services used by both the private and public sectors. These firms do not operate as independent actors in separate markets – they are deeply interconnected through data flows, platform control, and competitive interdependencies that reinforce one another's market positions (Lindman et al., 2023).

Big Tech corporations have created new forms of corporate power and control key digital markets. These Big Tech companies operate platforms that structure key digital markets and mediate vast amounts of economic and social activity (Lindman et al., 2023). These markets are characterised by strong network effects, meaning their value increases as more users join. This, in turn, creates barriers to entry, leading to a monopoly-like situation and enabling dominant firms to maintain their positions over time (Helberger et al., 2017). These platforms function as commercial services and as infrastructure that organise communication, information flows, and economic exchange in contemporary societies (van Dijck et al., 2018). This concentrated control provides the corporations with significant influence over both markets and the public sphere (Lindman et al., 2023). This shows the power that goes beyond traditional market dominance, as their platforms shape the conditions under which users access information, interact socially and participate in digital economies (Pace, 2018). Thus, the structural position of these companies within digital capitalism places them at the centre of debates about economic power, democratic governance and the role of private actors in regulating infrastructure.

1.2. Regulation of Big Tech

The regulation of Big Tech has become increasingly important as digital platforms have expanded beyond national boundaries and become deeply embedded in the economic and social infrastructures of everyday life. Unlike traditional firms that primarily operate within clearly defined national jurisdictions, large technology companies such as GAFAM function across multiple markets simultaneously and often provide services through digital infrastructures that transcend territorial borders (van Dijck et al., 2018). This creates significant challenges for individual states seeking to regulate them independently. Questions of taxation, competition policy, data protection and platform accountability are difficult to address effectively when firms are headquartered outside the regulating state and operate through transnational digital ecosystems (Lancieri, 2019). Although states remain sovereign and formally retain the right to regulate economic activity within their territory, the scale and cross-border nature of Big Tech make purely national regulation increasingly insufficient. In the EU single market, this challenge becomes particularly significant, as fragmented national rules could create regulatory inconsistencies across member states. A common European regulatory framework, therefore, allows for more coherent oversight, stronger enforcement capacity and greater bargaining power against dominant global firms (Bradford, 2023). As digital markets

continue to grow in societal importance, the question is no longer whether regulation is needed, but at what level it can be most effectively exercised.

The European Union has increasingly positioned itself as a global leader in regulating digital markets. In response to the rapid growth of US-based technology corporations, the EU has developed a policy framework centred on the concept of digital sovereignty, understood as the ability to regulate digital infrastructure and protect European economic and societal interests (Bradford, 2023). This approach is most clearly reflected in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), Digital Markets Act (DMA) and the Digital Services Act (DSA), which aim to increase accountability, transparency, and fairness within the digital economy. The GDPR helps citizens have more control over their data and limits companies on how much data they can collect (The European Parliament & The Council of the European Union, 2016). The DMA specifically targets so-called ‘gatekeeper’ platforms by limiting anti-competitive behaviour and reducing dominant firms' ability to control digital ecosystems (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2022a). In parallel, the DSA establishes rules concerning platform responsibility, content moderation, and user protection in online environments (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2022b). Together, these frameworks seek to rebalance power between dominant technology firms, regulators, and citizens, reinforcing the EU’s role as a norm-setting authority in the digital sphere. Making digital sovereignty in Europe is both an economic objective and an effort to safeguard public values and citizens’ rights within platform-based societies.

The EU’s regulatory strategy also reflects a transatlantic divide in approaches to digital governance. Since all of the GAFAM firms are headquartered in the United States, European regulation is often interpreted as both market intervention and a geopolitical response to US technological dominance (Bradford, 2023; Lancieri, 2019). While the United States has traditionally favoured a more market-driven approach to technology regulation, the EU places greater emphasis on competition policy, consumer protection, and public accountability (Bradford, 2023; Voss, 2020). This divergence creates an important political context for how European citizens may perceive Big Tech companies. These companies are often associated with US economic influence and global market power. Suggesting that public attitudes may be shaped by political narratives surrounding regulation, sovereignty, and external dependence, not just by their services (Antel et al., 2022). For European citizens, trust in Big Tech companies may thus be linked to whether these companies are perceived as adequately

regulated and aligned with European norms and values. This means that the EU-US regulatory divide may shape citizens' confidence in GAFAM (Bradford, 2023).

The Digital Markets Act (DMA) represents the European Union's central regulatory response to the concentration of market power in the digital economy. Introduced as part of the EU's efforts to strengthen digital sovereignty, the DMA targets large online platforms that act as 'gatekeepers' in digital markets (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2022a). These gatekeepers, which include major US-based GAFAM firms, possess significant control over access to digital services, consumers and business users, allowing them to shape competition and reinforce market dominance. The DMA seeks to address this imbalance by imposing obligations designed to ensure fairer competition, limit anti-competitive practices and reduce barriers to entry for smaller firms (Bradford, 2023; Frank, 2024). Alongside market regulation, the EU's digital sovereignty agenda is further reinforced by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which strengthens citizens' rights over personal data and limits platforms' ability to collect, process, and transfer data without a clear legal justification (The European Parliament & The Council of the European Union, 2016). Together, these frameworks directly challenge the economic and data-driven dominance of U.S.-headquartered technology firms and may shape how European citizens evaluate whether Big Tech companies are sufficiently controlled and held accountable.

The Digital Services Act (DSA) complements both the DMA and GDPR by focusing on the societal and communicative dimensions of platform power. While the DMA addresses market dominance and GDPR focuses on privacy and data rights, the DSA regulates how digital platforms manage content, user safety and transparency in online spaces (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2022b). Its primary objective is to ensure that large online platforms operate responsibly in the digital public sphere, particularly regarding illegal content, misinformation, algorithmic transparency, and the protection of users' rights (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2022b). This is especially relevant in the context of Big Tech companies, whose platforms increasingly mediate political communication, access to information and everyday social interaction. Compared to the United States, where platform governance has traditionally been more market-driven, the EU's regulatory approach places stronger emphasis on public values, democratic accountability and user protection (Bradford, 2023). These regulatory frameworks collectively shape citizens' perceptions of whether Big

Tech companies are trustworthy, transparent and aligned with European norms and expectations.

One of the most important features of the European Union's approach to regulating Big Tech is its shift from reactive problem-solving to preventive measures. Traditionally, competition law in both the EU and the United States has mainly operated through *ex post* enforcement, meaning that authorities intervene only after harmful or anti-competitive behaviour has already occurred (Bougette et al., 2025). In digital markets, however, this approach can be too slow, as large platforms often can strengthen their market position very quickly through network effects, access to vast amounts of data, and ecosystem lock-in (Bradford, 2023). For this reason, the DMA introduces a more preventive model by placing clear legal obligations on designated 'gatekeepers' before market harm occurs (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2022a). These obligations include restrictions on self-preferencing, limits on the use of third-party business data, and requirements to allow business users and consumers greater freedom of choice within platform ecosystems (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2022a). In 2025, the European Commission imposed the first major fines against Apple and Meta under the DMA (European Commission, 2025). Apple was fined for restricting app developers from directing users to alternative purchasing channels outside the Apple Store. At the same time, Meta was sanctioned for its advertising consent model that limited user choice (Parry, 2025). The DMA thus moves beyond traditional competition law and allows the EU to intervene directly when obligations are breached. This kind of visible enforcement may also influence how citizens perceive Big Tech companies, as stronger regulation may increase confidence that these firms are being properly monitored and held accountable.

The Digital Services Act provides the European Union with concrete legal tools to enforce platform accountability in practice, particularly regarding user reporting mechanisms and content moderation procedures. One of its key requirements is that very large online platforms must provide users with clear, accessible, and effective 'notice and action' mechanisms for reporting illegal content, as well as a transparent appeal process when content is removed (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2022b). In 2025, the European Commission's preliminary findings against Meta identified that Facebook and Instagram introduced unnecessary and potentially discouraging steps in their complaint systems. According to the Commission, these mechanisms may have made it difficult for users to report

illegal material, such as terrorist content and child sexual abuse material, thereby undermining the effectiveness of the DSA's reporting framework. The use of so-called 'dark patterns' was noted, which could confuse or dissuade users from completing their reporting process (O'Carroll & Booth, 2025). This clearly shows how the DSA enables direct regulatory intervention when platforms fail to meet standards. Similarly, to the extent that DMA applies, these measures may affect how citizens view the EU's ability to control Big Tech companies and hold them accountable effectively.

1.3. Conceptualising trust: political, institutional, corporate

Trust is a fundamental mechanism that enables cooperation between individuals and institutions. Levi and Stoker (2000) conclude that trust is a relational, powerful form of judgement. Trust is said to be between two parties, in which one party makes itself vulnerable to the other. It is also given to a specific party over a certain domain – thus it is unconditional (Levi & Stoker 2000). Existing literature suggests a "spillover" effect, where citizens who exhibit high levels of trust in political institutions are more likely to extend that confidence to other powerful societal actors, including major corporations (Høyer & Mønness, 2016; Norris, 2011). Conversely, low levels of trust may contribute to public scepticism and increased demands for political oversight (Norris 2011). To conceptualise 'trust' even further, it is separated into three dimensions: political, institutional, and corporate. Institutional trust is trust in formal organisations and systems, corporate trust is trust specifically in private firms, and political trust is trust in elected governments and political actors. They differ in objects, sources (performance, institutional fairness, socialisation), and consequences for governance and the economy.

1.3.1. Political and Institutional Trust

Political trust concerns the legitimacy and responsiveness of elected authorities and political leaders. It is rooted in the expectation that those in power will act in the public interest and remain accountable to the electorate (Devine et al 2024; Levi and Stoker 2000). Political trust reflects citizens' evaluations of whether institutions are competent, fair, and responsive, which shapes compliance with political decisions and support for democratic governance (Norris, 2011). Individuals who are generally more trusting are more inclined to extend that confidence to political institutions and authorities. This suggests that trust in government is not formed solely through institutional performance but is also rooted in deeper social attitudes and previous experiences of social cohesion (Uslaner, 2018). Conversely, low levels of social trust

are associated with greater scepticism towards political actors and heightened perceptions of corruption or inefficiency, which can destroy confidence in democratic institutions (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Political trust is therefore dynamic and context-dependent, shaped by institutional performance, political communication and social conditions (Devine et al., 2024).

Institutional trust is directed toward the rules, procedures and organisations through which authority is exercised. These organisations could be regulatory bodies, the judiciary, public administrations, etc. Rather than being attached to a specific political leader, it reflects citizens' confidence in the structures and processes that govern decision-making and enforce collective rules (Norris, 2011). Lahusen (2024) argues that institutional trust should be understood as a relational concept that extends beyond individual dispositions and concerns the expected trustworthiness of institutions as systems of organised authority (Lahusen, 2024). This expectation is grounded in perceptions of procedural fairness, rule-bound decision-making, competence, and neutrality, all of which shape citizens' views of institutions as legitimate and reliable actors (Lahusen, 2024). Institutional trust is vital to democratic stability, as it sustains confidence in the political system even when trust in particular officeholders declines (Lindman et al., 2023). Trust and distrust should not be treated merely as opposite ends of a single continuum, but as distinct yet coexisting orientations that may simultaneously shape citizens' evaluation of institutions (Lahusen, 2024). This distinction is especially relevant in the context of digital governance: citizens who believe that regulatory frameworks are fair and effectively enforced are more likely to accept the outcomes of regulatory decisions concerning powerful private actors, regardless of their personal political preference (Taylor, 2021).

Trust does not always operate the same way across institutions; it may differ depending on the level of governance. An analysis focusing on the Baltic states found that citizens distinguish between institutions: trust is lowest in representative institutions such as political parties and parliament, while the military is the most trusted institution, which suggests that people do not evaluate all state bodies equally (Lühiste, 2006). On the other hand, citizens tend to assess the main institutions of the European Union through a single general dimension of political trust rather than separated evaluations of the Commission, Parliament, Council, Court of Justice, or ECB (Arnold et al., 2012). These studies suggest that trust may be more differentiated at the national level, where institutions are more familiar and politically visible, than at the supranational level, where they feel farther removed from citizens' everyday lives. Differences in trust across institutions also appear to reflect the role and public image of those institutions.

In a cross-national European comparison, trust in the legal system is generally higher than trust in the electoral system. In comparison, trust in the European Parliament is lower than trust in national institutions (Ervasti et al., 2008: 131-151). This suggests that institutions associated with rules, legality, and adjudication may inspire more confidence than those directly tied to political competition and partisan conflict. The Baltic analysis points in the same direction: courts and police are trusted more than parties and parliaments, again indicating that citizens distinguish between institutions linked to representation and those linked to order (Lühiste, 2006). Institutional trust is shaped by whether an institution is ‘political’, and also by whether it is perceived as conflictual, partisan, or neutral. Trust in regulators, courts, and EU bodies may follow a different logic from that of trust in elected politicians, even though all of them fall within the broader field of political and institutional authority (Arnold et al., 2012; Ervasti et al., 2008: 131-151).

Trends in political and institutional trust over time differ across types of institutions, depending on their roles within the political system. Trust in representative institutions, such as parliaments, governments, and political parties, has generally declined in recent decades. In contrast, trust in implementing institutions, like the civil service, the police, and the legal system, has remained stable and in some cases even risen (Valgarðsson et al., 2025). This distinction is important as it suggests that declining trust should not be interpreted as a general crisis affecting all institutions equally. Rather, citizens appear to become more sceptical of institutions directly associated with electoral politics and representation, while maintaining relatively higher confidence in institutions perceived as administrative and rule-based (Valgarðsson et al., 2025). Regulatory institutions involved in Big Tech governance may be viewed more as implementing bodies than as elected political bodies. Thus, trust in regulatory authorities may remain more resilient over time, even in periods where trust in governments and politicians declines.

1.3.2. Trust in Big Tech

The study of trust in large technology corporations has often been approached through economics, marketing, information systems and consumer behaviour research. In these frameworks, corporate trust is usually understood as an expectation that firms will act competently, reliably and with integrity when providing goods or services to consumers (Gefen, 2000; McKnight et al., 2002). This approach treats trust mainly as a relationship between a consumer and a firm, where confidence is built through perceived usefulness, service

quality, reputation and repeated interaction. This is useful for explaining why consumers continue to use particular services, but it is limited when applied to Big Tech companies. These corporations do not simply sell products in ordinary markets: they organise digital environments where information, communication, and social interaction take place. Platform-based trust is therefore increasingly mediated through ratings, reputation systems and algorithmic selection mechanisms, which help users assess whether other actors and services can be trusted (van Dijck et al., 2018). These systems can substitute for older institutional guarantees, especially in platform markets where users interact with strangers through digital infrastructures (van Dijck et al., 2018).

Approaching trust in Big Tech from a political science perspective changes the definition of consumer trust. When a platform mediates electoral communication, curates public information, influences political mobilisation or determines what content users can access, trust is no longer reduced to consumer satisfaction. Citizens may trust or distrust GAFAM firms based on how they perceive these companies' roles in democratic life, regulatory systems, and public accountability. Technology corporations exercise public power through data, infrastructure and population-level interactions, while business ethics and private law are insufficient for evaluating this kind of power (Taylor, 2021). This makes legitimacy a central issue. If citizens cannot realistically opt out of commercial digital infrastructures, then these firms may need to be judged according to standards closer to those applied to public institutions (Taylor, 2021). Trust in Big Tech is therefore political as it concerns who holds power, how that power is governed and whether the arrangements surrounding it are legitimate. Political factors shape how citizens evaluate technology-mediated systems under conditions of uncertainty. Digital infrastructures are often technically complex, making it difficult for ordinary users to assess their reliability, security, or governance directly. In such cases, citizens may rely on party cues, institutional confidence, and party movements when forming judgements about whether a system can be trusted (Ehin & Solvak, 2021). This logic also applies to GAFAM; these firms are also complex digital systems whose internal operations, algorithmic choices and data practices are difficult to observe and evaluate. Trust in these GAFAM may therefore depend less on technical knowledge and more on the political and institutional cues citizens use to interpret platform power.

These forms of trust should therefore be understood as interconnected rather than separate. Citizens do not evaluate platforms solely as consumers, but also as members of a political

community affected by private control over communication, information, and participation. Platforms create a hybrid trust environment in which corporate behaviour, institutional oversight and political values overlap (Cornfield, 2022; Taylor, 2021). A citizen's trust in content moderation, data protection or platform accountability may depend on whether they trust the company itself, whether they believe regulations can enforce rules, and whether those rules reflect legitimate democratic values. This is why trust in GAFAM cannot be reduced to service quality or user experience. It is shaped by the relationships among firms, citizens, and public institutions (Helberger et al., 2017). This thesis treats trust in Big Tech as a hybrid political attitude shaped by corporate performance, institutional confidence and evaluation of democratic authority.

1.4. Political Attitudes and Trust in Big Tech

This section develops the theoretical mechanisms linking political attitudes to trust in large technology companies. Political ideology plays a central role in shaping how individuals evaluate economic and corporate actors. These evaluations are shaped by perceptions of corporations as market actors, as well as by attitudes toward authority, governance, and democratic performance. As large corporations occupy more infrastructural positions, citizens assess them using criteria similar to those applied to political institutions. Prior research shows that political trust and political preferences often influence confidence in state institutions and in adjacent knowledge-based institutions, suggesting that trust orientations can extend across institutional domains (Saarinen et al., 2020). The hypotheses developed below each identify a distinct theoretical pathway through which political attitudes may translate into trust or distrust in GAFAM firms.

Citizens' ideological orientation may shape their perceptions of corporate power. Individuals who identify as politically right-leaning are generally more likely to favour market-based solutions and to view private enterprise as a legitimate mechanism for organising economic activity (De Bondt, 2013). This orientation often corresponds with greater confidence in corporations and lower support for extensive state intervention. In contrast, left-leaning individuals are more likely to emphasise redistribution, regulation and concerns about concentrated economic power, leading to greater scepticism toward dominant firms. Political preferences and trust orientations extend beyond formal political institutions and influence confidence in other knowledge-based institutions, such as the media and universities (Saarinen et al., 2020). This finding is highly relevant for Big Tech, as major technology companies

increasingly function as infrastructures for information, communication and knowledge distribution. Citizens may evaluate these firms through ideological lenses similar to those used in assessing other influential institutions. Research also suggests that public trust in business and finance is closely linked to ideological shifts, particularly in periods marked by economic crises and declining confidence in capitalist institutions (De Bondt, 2013). Right-leaning citizens may therefore be more inclined to perceive Big Tech companies as innovative and legitimate market actors. At the same time, left-leaning individuals may focus more strongly on issues of monopoly power, accountability and corporate influence over public life.

H1: Citizens who identify as more right-leaning are more likely to express higher trust in Big Tech companies.

Citizens with more extreme ideological views may be less likely to trust Big Tech, as ideological conflict can foster distrust of powerful institutions. Political ideology and party preference shape trust in knowledge-based institutions, and that distrust can accumulate across institutional domains (Saarinen et al., 2020). This is especially visible among populist party supporters, who tend to show lower trust in knowledge-based institutions such as public media and universities, while low political trust is closely associated with this wider pattern of distrust (Saarinen et al., 2020). GAFAM functions increasingly more as knowledge and communication infrastructures, not only as private companies. Big Tech companies should be treated as political actors as they design, control and police civic arenas (Cornfield, 2022). Many citizens see large corporations as too powerful and support stronger regulation of business (De Bondt, 2013). From the left, scepticism toward Big Tech may stem from concerns about the concentration of corporate and market power. From the right, scepticism may be linked to concerns about content moderation, political bias, and platform control over speech (Cornfield, 2022).

H2: Citizens with more extreme ideological views (hard right, hard left) are less likely to trust Big Tech companies.

Citizens' satisfaction with democracy may shape how they evaluate the legitimacy of powerful actors within society, including Big Tech firms. Satisfaction with democracy reflects support for the functioning of democratic institutions and citizens' perceptions of whether the political system is responsive, effective and representative of public interests (Norris, 2011). Individuals who are satisfied with democratic performance are generally more likely to trust that

institutions are capable of constraining the power and ensuring their accountability to the public (Devine et al., 2024). This orientation toward system legitimacy may extend beyond public institutions to encompass major private actors operating within the same regulatory environment. This is particularly relevant in the European Union, where democratic institutions increasingly shape the governance of digital markets through regulations such as DMA and DSA (Bradford, 2023). Citizens who perceive democracy as functioning effectively may therefore be more likely to trust that powerful technology firms are adequately monitored and held accountable. This means that satisfaction with democracy may directly lead to greater confidence in the regulatory framework governing GAFAM and, through that, to greater trust in the firms themselves.

H3: Citizens who report higher satisfaction with democracy are more likely to trust Big Tech.

Trust in political institutions is expected to influence citizens' trust in Big Tech through a similar spillover mechanism to that of satisfaction with democracy. Institutional trust reflects confidence in the fairness, competence, and legitimacy of the structures through which authority is exercised, including governments, parliaments, courts and other regulatory bodies (Høyer & Mønness, 2016; Levi & Stoker, 2000; Norris, 2011). Trust in institutions is closely tied to perceptions of legitimacy and responsiveness; it may also extend beyond political institutions and shape how citizens evaluate other powerful actors within society (Devine et al., 2024). Political trust frequently spills over into confidence in other knowledge-based institutions (Saarinen et al., 2020). This is important for Big Tech companies, which function as public infrastructures for communication, information distribution and economic exchange (van Dijck et al., 2018). Thus, citizens who trust the public institutions responsible for regulating markets and protecting public interests may therefore be more likely to trust that Big Tech firms operate within fair and enforceable rules. Unlike democratic satisfaction, which is an overall evaluation, institutional trust is directed at the specific actors responsible for regulating GAFAM, making it potentially a more powerful predictor.

H4: Citizens who report stronger trust in political institutions are also more likely to trust Big Tech.

In the INCA survey, trust in institutions can be split into two categories: trust in national political institutions and trust in the European Union political institutions. Trust in national

political institutions may be important for shaping trust toward Big Tech, as national governments remain the most immediate and visible level of authority in citizens' everyday lives. Citizens interact with national institutions through courts, public administrations, tax systems, and other institutions, making these institutions central reference points for evaluating whether private corporations are effectively constrained. Institutional trust is strongly shaped by perceived political and economic performance, suggesting that citizens are more likely to trust national political institutions when they are seen as effective, fair and responsive to public needs (Lühiste, 2006). The OECD (2025) report shows that trust in public institutions depends on perceptions of reliability, responsiveness, fairness, integrity and openness. Citizens rely on national institutions to enforce competition law, protect consumers and safeguard data rights; thus, if national institutions are perceived as competent, transparent and capable of acting in the public interest, this confidence may spill over into greater trust that large technology firms are operating within legitimate and enforceable rules (OECD, 2025). Comparative research on political trust further suggests that citizens differentiate between institutional targets depending on how they evaluate their performance and legitimacy (Ervasti et al., 2008).

H4.1: Citizens who report stronger trust in national political institutions are more likely to trust Big Tech

Trust in European Union political institutions may shape citizens' trust in Big Tech through a mechanism rooted in supranational legitimacy and regulatory capacity. Unlike national institutions, EU institutions are primarily associated with cross-border governance, rule-making, and market regulation, which is especially relevant for transnational technology firms (Arnold et al., 2012). Because GAFAM companies operate across national borders, citizens may assess their trust in these firms partly through their confidence in the European institutions that regulate them. Support for supranational institutions is strongly linked to perceptions of institutional legitimacy, procedural fairness and effective policy performance, particularly in policy areas where the EU is seen as capable of addressing issues beyond the reach of national governments (Arnold et al., 2012). The EU has taken a leading regulatory role in digital governance through GDPR, DMA, and DSA (Bradford, 2023). If citizens perceive EU institutions as competent, transparent and capable of constraining corporate power, this confidence may spill over into greater trust that Big Tech firms operate within an effective and legitimate regulatory framework. At the same time, trust in EU institutions may reflect overall support for European integration and governance capacity, making it an especially important

predictor of trust in transnational corporate actors whose activities specifically require supranational oversight.

H4.2: Citizens who report stronger trust in EU political institutions are more likely to trust Big Tech

Finally, age may shape how ideology translates into trust in Big Tech, as political attitudes are formed and expressed differently across generations. Younger generations are socialised in a political environment where traditional party loyalties are weaker, protest-oriented participation is more common, and representative institutions are more frequently questioned (Muxel, 2020). Political orientations developed at a young age tend to persist over time, which makes generational differences relevant when examining how ideology influences attitudes toward private actors (Uba & Bosi, 2022). Ideological self-placement on the left-right scale is also a meaningful indicator of political positioning, including at the extremes of the spectrum (Uba & Bosi, 2022). Younger individuals have grown up in a highly digitalised environment where platforms are embedded in everyday communication, information access and participation (van Dijck et al., 2018). If political ideology shapes how individuals evaluate power and authority, then its effects on trust in GAFAM are likely to differ across age groups.

H5: The relationship between political self-placement on the left-right scale and trust in the GAFAM firms is moderated by the age of the respondents.

2. Data and Methodology

This chapter gives an overview of the research design and methodological approach used to examine the determinants of citizens' trust in Big Tech companies. This research is a quantitative study that builds on a theoretical framework that emphasises the role of political attitudes and institutional trust in shaping perceptions of Big Tech companies. It uses data from a 15-country public opinion survey (Ehin et al., 2024) that captures individual-level variation in trust towards GAFAM companies, thereby enabling systematic comparisons across European Union member states. The dependent variable is individuals' trust in Big Tech companies, and independent variables include political orientation/ideology, satisfaction with democracy and trust in political institutions. In addition, socio-demographic factors such as gender, age and education are analysed as possible determinants of trust in GAFAM firms. The analysis is conducted using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to examine the relationship between political attitudes and trust in GAFAM companies. The author also acknowledges the use of AI tools (ChatGPT – 5.5 Thinking, and Claude – Sonnet 4.6) for language support and linguistic corrections in parts of this thesis. All content was reviewed, verified, and validated by the author, who retains full responsibility for this thesis.

2.1. Data and Operationalisation

2.1.1. Data

The empirical foundation of this thesis is a large-scale cross-national survey dataset that provides a basis for studying public trust in Big Tech companies across the European Union. The used dataset is by Ehin et al (2024), *Public Perceptions of Big Tech Companies in Europe*, of the Horizon Europe-funded project 'Increase Corporate Political Responsibility and Accountability' (INCA). The survey was fielded by Norstat Eesti AS during Autumn 2024, specifically between September and November, and finalised on 27th of November 2024 (Ehin et al., 2024). The finalised version contains responses from 22,618 individuals across 15 European countries: Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, and Sweden (see Table 1 for the number of respondents per country). Given the survey's scope, this dataset is among the most comprehensive public opinion datasets currently available for the study of perceptions of Big Tech corporations in Europe. The span of countries included ensures variation across political cultures, regulatory traditions, and levels of digital infrastructure.

Table 1. Number of survey respondents

Country	Number of respondents	Data collection period
Belgium	1501	23.09-08.11.2024
Denmark	1500	23.09-07.10.2024
Estonia	1505	23.09-07.10.2024
Finland	1602	23.09-13.10.2024
France	1500	23.09-27.09.2024
Germany	1503	23.09-10.10.2024
Hungary	1500	23.09-27.09.2024
Ireland	1500	23.09-02.10.2024
Italy	1502	23.09-07.10.2024
Netherlands	1504	23.09-08.10.2024
Poland	1501	23.09-07.10.2024
Portugal	1500	23.09-05.10.2024
Slovakia	1500	23.09-30.09.2024
Spain	1500	23.09-27.09.2024
Sweden	1500	23.09-08.10.2024
Total	22,618	23.09-08.11.2024

Source: Big Tech Survey (Ehin et al., 2024)

Data collection was conducted via online panels, with respondents recruited from pre-existing participant pools. Respondents are typically contacted via email or platform notifications and can choose whether to participate in a given survey. Quota sampling was applied within each country to approximate the population distribution of key socio-demographic characteristics, including age, gender, and region (Ehin et al., 2024). This helped ensure that each national sample reflected key population characteristics and that the data remained comparable across countries. However, as the survey relied on online panels rather than random probability sampling, respondents may differ from the wider population in their willingness to participate in surveys, their internet use, and their familiarity with digital technologies. The dataset's geographic scope enhances its comparative value. The 15 countries were selected to represent different parts of the European Union, including Northern, Southern, Eastern, and Western Europe, as well as older and newer member states. For each country, residence is recorded at a

sub-national level. For Estonia and Belgium, an additional language variable captures whether respondents completed the survey in Estonian or Russian, and in Dutch or French, respectively (Ehin et al., 2024). The total sample provides sufficient statistical power for both pooled cross-national analyses and country-specific subgroup examinations

The survey covers a broad range of topics related to citizens' perceptions of Big Tech companies in Europe. It includes measures of trust in individual GAFAM firms, attitudes toward their influence and responsibilities, and views on digital regulation and governance. Respondents were also asked about their awareness of regulatory frameworks and their personal behaviour related to data sharing and platform use. In addition, the survey includes key political variables, such as left-right ideological self-placement, satisfaction with democracy, and trust in political institutions at both the national and EU levels. Socio-demographic information, including age, gender, education and place of residence, is also collected (Ehin et al., 2024). The depth of the survey enables analysis of trust in Big Tech within a wider political and social framework.

2.1.2. Operationalisation of variables

The dependent variable in this thesis is public trust in GAFAM companies, operationalised as a composite index derived from five company-specific trust items included in the survey: Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft. The respondents were asked: "On a scale of 0-10 how much do you personally trust each of the following Big Tech companies?" Respondents could choose a value for each of the GAFAM companies (Ehin et al., 2024). As indicated before, the responses were given on a numeric scale ranging from 0 ('not at all') to 10 ('to a very great extent'), with also an option of 99 for 'do not know'. The composite index is constructed by averaging the five items, treating 'do not know' responses as missing. The use of an index increases reliability and reduces measurement error associated with any single item. Nonetheless, recognising that respondents may hold distinct perceptions of individual firms, such as viewing Microsoft as more trustworthy than Facebook, the descriptive statistics also bring out trust in each company separately.

The empirical analysis uses four main independent variables, including political self-placement on a left-right scale, satisfaction with democracy, trust in political institutions, and two sociodemographic controls (age and gender). The first three independent variables, except for socio-demographic factors, are recorded on a 0-10 scale, with an option 99 as 'do not know/prefer not to say'. All scale specifications are discussed in each section separately. All

of the 99 'do not know/prefer not to say' responses are recorded as missing, as they are not interpretable.

Political orientation is operationalised using respondents' self-placement on a left-right ideological scale. Participants were asked to place themselves on a scale from 0 to 10: "In politics, people sometimes talk of 'left' and 'right'. Where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?" (Ehin et al., 2024). As before, there was also an option for 99 - 'do not know'. Left-right ideology may function as a substitute for underlying values regarding economic regulation, privacy, and corporate power. As proposed in Hypothesis 1, people who identify as more right-leaning may demonstrate greater trust in Big Tech companies. At the same time, those who lean left may be more sceptical of large corporations. Political extremism is operationalised through respondents' distance from the ideological midpoint on the 0-10 left-right self-placement scale. Positions at the endpoints of ideology scales tend to correspond more closely with consistent, strongly one-sided political preferences, making them the most appropriate indicators of ideological intensity (Jordan & Ferguson, 2016). In this dataset, responses closer to 0 and 10 reflect stronger ideological commitment, while values nearer to the midpoint (5) indicate more moderate positions. For this thesis, respondents scoring 0-1 are classified as extreme left, and those scoring 9-10 as extreme right, as these categories represent the clearest endpoints on the ideological scale. This allows the analysis to distinguish between the direction of political orientation and the strength of ideological positioning. For the OLS regression, ideology is mean-centred prior to inclusion in the model, and its squared term is included alongside the linear term to test the curvilinear relationship posed in Hypothesis 2.

Satisfaction with democracy is operationalised using a single survey item that assesses respondents' overall evaluation of democracy's functioning in their country. Participants were asked: "Overall, how satisfied are you with how democracy works in our [COUNTRY]?" Responses were recorded on a scale from 0 ('extremely dissatisfied') to 10 ('extremely satisfied'), with option 99 as 'don't know/refuse to say' (Ehin et al., 2024). This variable captures the overall assessment of democratic performance rather than trust in specific institutions, offering a broader indication of system-level legitimacy. In this research, democratic satisfaction is expected to be theoretically linked to trust in Big Tech companies through its association with institutional and political trust. The variable is included in the

analysis to test Hypothesis 3, which posits that higher levels of democratic satisfaction are associated with greater trust in Big Tech companies.

Trust in political institutions is divided into four aspects: three concern the country of residence, and one concerns the European Union. The participants were asked three questions about the domestic institutions: “On a scale of 0-10, how much do you personally trust [COUNTRY]’S parliament, government?” “-parliament?” and “- the legal system?” Thus, the three aspects of the country of residence are: trust in [the country’s] parliament, trust in [the country’s] government, and trust in [the country’s] legal system. The last aspect of trust in institutions is ‘trust in the European Parliament’. Participants were asked: “On a scale of 0-10, how much do you personally trust the European Parliament?” All aspects are measured on a 0 (‘not at all’) to 10 (‘completely’) scale, with an option for ‘don’t know/refuse to say’ as mentioned earlier (Ehin et al., 2024). These four items make up the trust in institutions variable, covering both national and international levels. Trust in institutions may transfer to Big Tech companies as well – citizens who overall trust institutions also trust them to regulate Big Tech companies, so that they may show greater trust towards the GAFAM firms. As suggested in Hypothesis 4, people who report stronger trust in political institutions are more likely to trust Big Tech.

Trust in national political institutions is operationalised using three survey items that capture respondents’ confidence in core domestic institutions: the national parliament, the national government, and the legal system. The same items are used in the independent variable ‘trust in political institutions’. As said before, respondents were asked to indicate how much they personally trust each institution on a scale from 0 (‘not at all’) to 10 (‘completely’), with 99 representing “do not know” or refusal to answer (Ehin et al., 2024). These items reflect different dimensions of institutional trust, including trust in representative political bodies (parliament), executive authority (government), and rule-based institutions (legal system). Combining these allows for a more comprehensive assessment of trust in national governance structures. In this thesis, these variables are used together as a summed variable of ‘trust in national political institutions’. Trust in the EU political institutions is operationalised using one survey item: trust in the European Parliament. As stated in the last paragraph, trust in EP is measured on a 0-10 scale, the same as for domestic institutions. Both variables are used to control for the sub-hypotheses of Hypothesis 4. This operationalisation allows for a direct comparison between trust in national and supranational institutions, enabling the analysis to assess whether trusting domestic institutions or trusting the EP has a greater effect on trust in GAFAM firms.

Among the sociodemographic variables, age, sex, and education are included as control variables in the multivariate regression to ensure proper statistical analysis. Age is measured in two ways: age groups and each respondent's age in years. Age groups are used for descriptive statistics, and numerical age is used as the control variable in the regression model. Age is also later used as a moderator in a moderation analysis to examine the relationship between left-right ideology and trust in GAFAM; in the moderation analysis, age is centred. Gender is used as a second control variable. Respondents had four different options to choose from: 1. Male, 2. Female, 3. Non-binary, and 4. Prefer not to say (Ehin et al., 2024). The analysis was conducted using the gender options of male and female, as the number of respondents choosing options 3 and 4 was insufficient to include them. Gender was coded as a binary variable (0 = male, 1 = female).

The last sociodemographic variable is education. Education had standardised answers in 13 of the 15 countries; Denmark and Poland offered country-specific options. Education was recoded into three categories (low, secondary, higher), with secondary education serving as the reference category. Two dummy variables were created to capture differences between low and higher education relative to the reference group. Higher education included 'Higher education (university degree)' and 'Applied/vocational higher education'. Secondary education included 'Secondary education (high school diploma)' and 'Vocational secondary education (vocational diploma)'. Lower education included 'Lower-secondary (8-11 years of schooling, no high school diploma)' and 'Basic education (6 years of schooling or less)'; the 'Other' option was excluded from the study because it received very few responses. For Denmark, the country-specific options were normalised and listed into one of the three categories. '*Folkeskole / Grundskole*' is coded as lower education, '*Gymnasial uddannelse (Student, HF, HH, HTX og lign.)*' and '*Erhvervsuddannelse*' are coded as secondary education. Higher education included '*Kort videregående uddannelse*', '*Mellemlang videregående uddannelse (Bachelorniveau)*', and '*Lang videregående uddannelse (Kandidatniveau eller højere)*'. Again, the option 99 'other' was excluded as it did not have enough responses. The same method was applied to Poland: '*Podstawowe*' was coded as lower education, '*Zawodowe*' and '*Średnie*' as secondary education, and '*Wyższe*' as higher education; Poland did not have an option for 'other'.

To account for country-level differences, country dummy variables were additionally created and included in the final regression model. Each dummy variable represented one country in the sample, with Germany as the reference category. These country fixed effects were included

to control for unobserved country-specific contextual factors that may influence trust in GAFAM.

2.2. Methodology

This section outlines the statistical methods used to analyse the relationship between perception/attitudes and trust in GAFAM firms. The methodological approach combines descriptive and inferential statistical techniques to first identify general patterns in the data and then test the hypothesis derived from the theoretical framework. To obtain the most accurate results, all respondents who answered '99' (do not know/prefer not to say) to at least one of the variables used were removed from the study. The overall number of responses in the survey was 22,618. In total, after deleting non-contributive answers, the final number of responses was 17,358. All analyses are conducted in IBM SPSS. Graphs and tables are created in either IBM SPSS, MS Word, or MS Excel.

The empirical analysis begins with descriptive statistical analysis to provide a clear overview of the variables included in the study. Descriptive statistics are used to examine the distribution, central tendencies, and variation of key measures such as political ideology, satisfaction with democracy, and institutional trust. By presenting measures such as the mean, median, standard deviation and range, this stage of the analysis helps identify general patterns across respondents. It provides an initial understanding of how trust levels vary within the sample. In addition to providing an overview of the data, descriptive statistics are important for detecting potential outliers, unusual distributions, and missing values that may influence subsequent regression analysis. This step, therefore, serves as the empirical foundation for the inferential part of the study by ensuring that the structure and quality of the data are clearly understood before hypothesis testing begins.

The main inferential analysis relies on Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression to test the relationship between political attitudes and trust in GAFAM companies. OLS regression is appropriate because the dependent variable is measured on a continuous 0-10 scale, allowing for the estimation of linear relationships between the outcome variable and the selected predictors (mentioned before). The analysis proceeds in three models. Model 1 includes the three main political attitude predictors – ideological self-placement (both linear and squared items), satisfaction with democracy, and institutional trust – without sociodemographic controls. Model 2 adds age, gender, and education as control variables to assess the power of the political attitude effects and to examine the independent contribution of individual-level

characteristics. Including the squared ideology term enables the models to detect curvilinear relationships and test whether ideological extremity and direction predict GAFAM trust, as proposed in Hypothesis 2. Model 3 also included country fixed effects via a set of country dummy variables to account for country-specific contextual differences. To test Hypothesis 5, a moderation analysis is conducted using the PROCESS macro for SPSS. Left-right self-placement serves as the focal predictor, age as the moderator, and total trust in GAFAM as the outcome variable. The interaction term (ideology x age) is included alongside the main effects of ideology and age. The Johnson-Neyman technique and conditional effects at representative values of age are used to probe the nature and extent of the moderation.

The pooled regression models are complemented by country-specific OLS regression analyses that estimate Model 1 separately for each of the 15 national samples. These split-sample regressions – run as bivariate models for each country, with trust in institutions, satisfaction with democracy, and ideological self-placement as predictors – allow for direct assessment of cross-national variation in effect sizes and statistical significance. This makes it possible to evaluate whether the predictors identified in the pooled analysis operate consistently across national contexts or whether their effects are moderated by country-level factors such as democratic quality, level of institutional trust, and the salience of digital governance in public discourse. The baseline OLS equation for the base analysis model is:

$$\text{Trust in GAFAM} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Ideology}) + \beta_2(\text{Ideology}^2) + \beta_3(\text{Institutional Trust}) + \beta_4(\text{Democratic Satisfaction}) + \beta_5(\text{Age}) + \beta_6(\text{Gender}) + \beta_7(\text{Education_low}) + \beta_8(\text{Education_high}) + \beta_9(\text{Country fixed effects}) + \varepsilon$$

Where: β_0 – the intercept;

β_1 - β_9 – unstandardised regression coefficients;

ε – the error term.

The squared ideology term (Ideology^2) captures potential curvilinear effects. For the country-specific regressions, the model is simplified to the three main political attitude predictors without sociodemographic controls, as the smaller within-country sample sizes limit statistical power for more fully specified models.

3. The Effect of Political Attitudes on Trust in GAFAM

This chapter presents the empirical findings of the thesis and discusses them in relation to the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 1. The analysis proceeds in four stages. First, descriptive statistics provide an overview of the key variables and their distribution across the sample. Second, a bivariate analysis examines the preliminary relationship between political attitude variables and trust in GAFAM using Pearson correlation coefficients and OLS regression. Third, a multivariate OLS regression tests the relative explanatory power of each predictor while controlling for sociodemographic characteristics, and a moderation analysis assesses whether age conditions the relationship between ideology and trust in GAFAM. Fourth, country-specific regression models reveal how the identified relationships vary across the 15 national contexts included in the sample. These analyses evaluate the five hypotheses derived from the theoretical framework and frame the discussion with debates about digital governance and Big Tech.

3.1. Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics indicate that overall trust in GAFAM firms is generally positive, though there is some variation across individual companies. As shown in Figure 1, Microsoft has the highest average trust score among the five firms, with a mean of 6.29, followed by Google at 6.00 and Apple at 5.77. Amazon averages 5.43, while Facebook records the lowest level of trust at 4.79. This distribution suggests that although respondents generally express trust in large technology companies, the degree of trust varies across firms. The spread between the highest and the lowest is substantial, indicating that respondents differentiate between companies rather than treating GAFAM as a homogeneous group. The overall average (5.66) remains above the midpoint of the scale. However, the variation implies that company-specific perceptions, such as reliability, usefulness, and prior experience with digital services, shape trust.

The operationalisation of trust in this thesis deliberately uses a composite GAFAM index to capture a generalised orientation towards Big Tech as a whole, rather than evaluating any single firm in isolation. However, the descriptive variation across firms suggests that the composite measure aggregates meaningfully distinct reputational profiles. Facebook's notably low average (4.79) likely reflects the sustained public and regulatory scrutiny the platform has faced over data privacy, content moderation failures, and its role in political misinformation – issues

that are highly salient within the EU’s regulatory agenda (Bradford, 2023; European Commission, 2025; O’Carroll & Booth, 2025). Microsoft’s comparatively high trust score (6.29), on the other hand, may reflect its more neutral public image as a productivity and enterprise software provider, relatively distanced from the platform controversies that have dominated media coverage. This suggests that the composite index captures a meaningful signal about generalised corporate trust while inevitably smoothing over variation that future firm-specific analysis could explore in more depth.

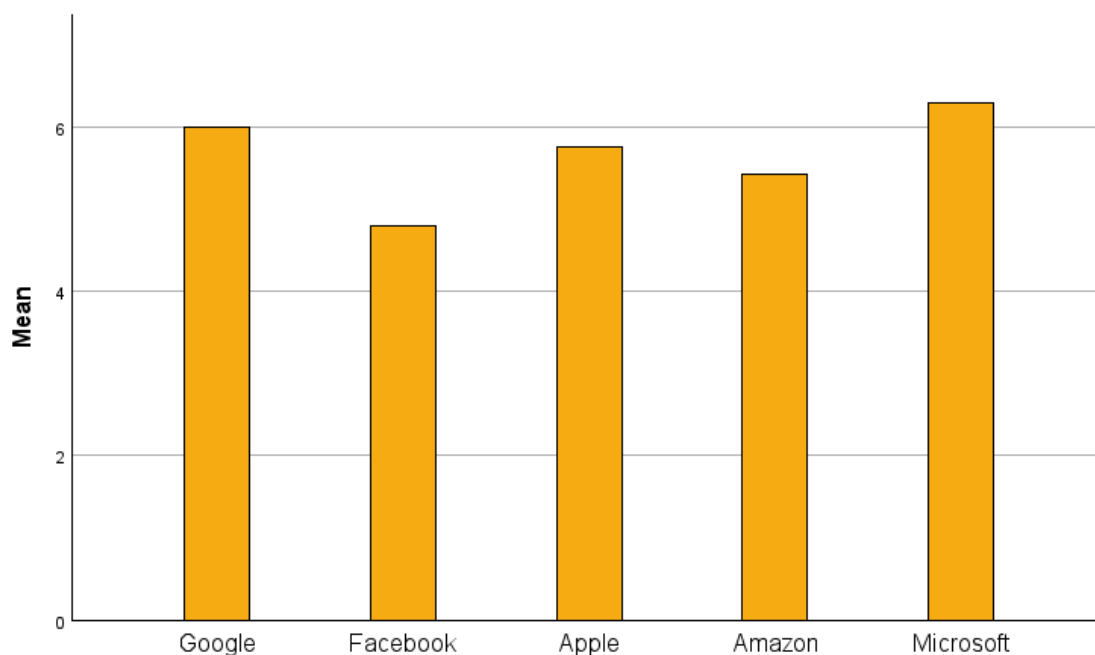


Figure 1. Average levels of trust in GAFAM

Source: Big Tech Survey (Ehin et al 2024)

Note: trust in GAFAM companies was measured on a scale from 0 (lowest) to 10 (highest)

A similar pattern of variation emerges when examining trust levels across countries, as shown in Figure 2. The heat map shows that trust levels in GAFAM are not evenly distributed geographically but differ considerably across Europe. Higher trust levels appear in Southern and some Western European countries, such as Spain, Italy, and France, whereas lower levels are observed in parts of Northern and Eastern Europe. This kind of geographic variation suggests that firm-level characteristics and societal and institutional contexts, including digital literacy, regulatory environments, and broader levels of institutional trust, may influence trust in Big Tech. Countries with stronger confidence in institutions or more positive attitudes towards technological innovation may be more inclined to trust large technology firms. At the same time, more sceptical environments may foster lower levels of trust. Overall, the cross-

country differences reinforce the idea that both individual perceptions of companies and wider national contexts shape public trust in GAFAM.

When the geographic distribution is reflected in the theoretical framework, an interesting variation arises. The relatively higher trust observed in Southern European countries – Spain, Italy, and France – is illogical at first glance, given these are also countries with historically lower levels of generalised institutional trust (Valgarðsson et al., 2025). One possible explanation is that, in contexts where formal institutions are viewed with some scepticism, citizens may be more willing to trust private actors. Especially to private actors that provide tangible everyday services, precisely because those services are perceived as operating outside the contested terrain of domestic politics. This prediction aligns with the theory that platforms have become quasi-infrastructure actors embedded in daily life in ways that transcend political evaluation (van Dijck et al., 2018). On the other hand, lower trust observed in Northern and Eastern Europe may reflect different dynamics. In Northern Europe, higher baseline institutional trust (Valgarðsson et al., 2025) could mean that citizens hold Big Tech to a more demanding standard of accountability. In Eastern Europe, prior experiences with surveillance and state overreach may generate scepticism and sensitivity to data-driven platforms. These patterns highlight the importance of contextualising trust in GAFAM at the individual level as well as in national political contexts.

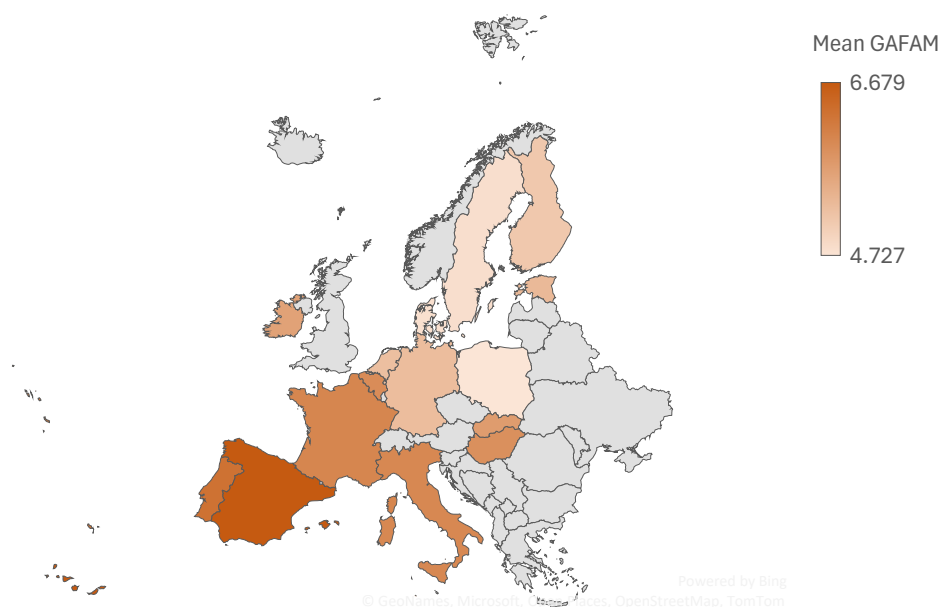


Figure 2. Average trust in GAFAM per country

Source: Big Tech Survey (Ehin et al 2024)

Note: trust in GAFAM companies was measured on a scale from 0 (lowest) to 10 (highest)

Political left-right self-placement, measured on a 0-10 scale, has a mean of 5.31 (SD = 2.45), indicating that respondents are on average slightly right of centre. However, the distribution spans the full range of the scale, reflecting substantial ideological diversity within the sample (N = 17,358). A notable concentration of responses (4,586) occurs around the midpoint, particularly at value 5 (political centre), indicating that 26.4% of respondents align themselves at the centre of the left-right scale. Around the centre point, the right-leaning ideology is more represented: responses 6 and 7 account for 22.1% (3,821) of the responses. The left-leaning responses 3 and 4 add up to 19% (3,289). Both ends of the scale ('extremes') are also represented, though not as heavily as the centre-right of the scale. Left-extremist (responses 0 and 1) accounts for only 6.9% (1,206) of the responses, while right-extremist (responses 9 and 10) has a slightly higher response rate at 10.1% (1,757). The presence of over 2,900 respondents at the ideological extremes provides sufficient statistical power to examine whether extremity, rather than direction, conditions trust in Big Tech, as proposed in Hypothesis 2.

Satisfaction with democracy (N = 17,358), measured on a 0-10 scale, has a mean of 5.56 (SD = 2.64), indicating that respondents are, on average, moderately satisfied with democracy in their country. The distribution is concentrated in the middle and upper-middle categories; the most frequent responses are 8 (14.6%), 7 (17.5%), and 6 (14.2%), while the midpoint, 5, accounts for 13.7% of respondents. In total, 56.8% of respondents report positive responses (over the centre 5), and 29.4% report negative responses (below the centre 5), indicating a rather positive level of satisfaction with democracy among most respondents. This moderate positive mean is broadly aligned with existing survey evidence on democratic satisfaction in the European Union, where citizens generally express cautious support for democratic institutions even as they report declining confidence in specific political actors (Valgarðsson et al., 2025). The relatively high share of respondents reporting positive democratic satisfaction provides a meaningful distribution for testing Hypothesis 3.

Combining the average trust in the national parliament, government, legal system, and the European Parliament on a 0-10 scale (N = 17,358), the mean total trust in institutions is 5.10 (SD = 2.39), indicating that respondents exhibit moderate trust in political institutions overall. The distribution is again centred around the midpoint, with the most frequent response being 5.00 (5.0%), followed by 6.00 (4.3%), 7.00 (4.3%), and 5.75 (4.0%). In total, 36.7% of respondents fall within the range of 5.00 to 7.00, indicating moderately positive trust. At the lower end of the scale, 22.1% of respondents report values of 0-3; thus, a notable share of

citizens express low trust in political institutions. At the higher end, 11.1% fall between options 8.00 and 10.00, suggesting that very strong trust in political institutions is less common.

The overall trust in national political institutions is positive leaning, with a mean of 5.08 (SD = 2.53) (N = 17,358). The highest concentration of answers is between 5 and 7, accounting for 36.3% of all the answers. Looking at the three components separately, it can be seen that the national legal system has the highest mean average trust, 5.32 (SD = 2.77), while the national parliament has 5.16 (SD = 2.71) and the national government has 4.75 (SD = 2.92). In the national legal system, only 18.2% of respondents report low trust (options 0-2), while 52.8% report moderate trust (options 5-8). Though extremely low trust (option 0) (8.0%) is more common than extremely high trust (option 10) (4.5%). A similar pattern can be seen in trust in the national parliament, where the highest concentration of answers stays between options 5-8 (55.7%). Thus, average trust is moderately positive, but extremely low trust (8.9%) is again more than twice as common as extremely high trust (3.8%). Regarding trust in the national government, the middle-positive answers (options 5-8) account for 49.6%. The extremely low trust, however, is much higher in the national government than in any other political institution included in the study, accounting for 13.5% of all responses. Compared to the extremely high trust of the national government (3.8%), it is more than three times higher. Trust in the European Parliament also has a mean of 5.15 (SD = 2.65) (N = 17,358). Again, the most common answers fall between 5 and 7, accounting for 46.6%. Similarly, as with other political institutions, there are more extreme low scores (8.8%) than extreme high scores (3.4%).

This ranking of institutional trust, in which the legal system is the most trusted and the national government the least, aligns with the trust framework discussed in Chapter 1. As discussed, rule-based institutions such as courts and the police tend to be more trusted than representative bodies directly associated with political ruling (Lühiste, 2006). Similarly, implementing institutions outperform representative institutions in the long-run trust comparison (Valgarðsson et al., 2025). This suggests that the three national institutional trust items included in the analysis capture different dimensions. The legal system relates to procedural legitimacy and rule-of-law confidence, whereas government and parliament trust is more directly tied to evaluations of current political performance.

The total number of respondents was 22,618. Approximately 50% (11,315) identified as male, 49.6% (11,220) as female, and the rest, around 0.4% (83), identified as non-binary or preferred not to answer. Due to the 'non-binary' and 'prefer not to say' samples being too small, they

were removed from the analysis, reducing the total valid sample. The total number of respondents in the analysis was 17,179 (after removing all the non-contributive answers from all of the sociodemographic controls). Of those respondents, 7,907 were male, and 9,272 were female, representing 46% and 54% of the valid sample, respectively. This indicates a relatively balanced gender distribution, although female respondents are slightly overrepresented. The survey included respondents aged 18-75 ($N = 17,179$). When sampling those ages into categories, the percentages of age groups are as follows. Respondents aged 18-24 account for 1,845 individuals, representing only 10.6% of the valid sample. The largest shares are found in the middle age groups, with 3,361 respondents in the 35-44 (17.2%) age group and 3,388 in the 45-54 (19.5%) age group. The remaining groups are also strongly represented, including 3,106 respondents aged 25-34 (17.9%), 2,990 aged 55-64 (17.2%) and 2,668 respondents aged 65-75 (15.4%). The average respondent was around 46 years old. Education, as mentioned before, is coded into three categories (low, secondary, high) ($N = 17,179$). The majority of respondents fall into the higher education category (51.8%), while 41.6% belong to the second category, and only 6.3% are classified as having lower education. 0.7% of the responses were 'prefer not to say' and thus invalid for the analysis. Overall, the sample is relatively well educated, which complicates the regression analysis, as the lower-education sample is much smaller.

3.2. Bivariate Analysis

All hypotheses were tested using regression or moderation analysis in IBM SPSS (Version 31.0). Prior to the regression analysis, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the bivariate relationship between political attitudes and trust in GAFAM. The analysis was conducted among four variables: total trust in GAFAM, left-right self-placement, satisfaction with democracy and total trust in political institutions ($N = 17,358$). All three independent variables were positively correlated with trust in GAFAM at a $p < 0.001$ level. The strongest bivariate relationship was found between trust in political institutions and trust in GAFAM ($r = 0.314$; $p < 0.001$), followed by satisfaction with democracy ($r = 0.238$; $p < 0.001$) and left-right self-placement ($r = 0.157$; $p < 0.001$). These positive correlations provide preliminary support for the theoretical expectation that political attitudes are associated with trust in GAFAM. The spillover mechanism proposed in Chapter 1 is supported by the fact that institutional trust shows the strongest bivariate association with trust in GAFAM. The moderate correlation with satisfaction with democracy ($r = 0.238$) suggests that system-level legitimacy evaluations also carry across institutional domains. In contrast, the weaker correlation with

ideology ($r = 0.157$) indicates that ideological orientation translates into corporate trust attitudes less directly.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that citizens who are more right-leaning are more likely to show greater trust towards GAFAM firms. To test this hypothesis, a linear regression analysis was conducted with left-right self-placement as the independent variable and total trust in GAFAM as the dependent variable. The regression analysis showed a statistically significant relationship between left-right self-placement and total trust in GAFAM ($B = 0.143$, $SE = 0.007$, $\beta = 0.157$, $t = 20.984$, $p < 0.001$). Indicating that for every one-unit increase to the left-right scale (towards the political right), average trust in GAFAM increases by approximately 0.14 points. The positive coefficient is also reflected in Figure 3, where the fitted regression line shows a clear upward trend across the ideological scale. However, the model explains a very modest share of variance ($R^2 = 0.025$). The result supports the theoretical expectation that right-leaning respondents display greater trust in GAFAM. Hypothesis 1 is therefore supported on the bivariate level.

This aligns with broader literature on the relationship between pro-market ideology and trust. As discussed in Chapter 1, individuals who identify as right-leaning tend to hold more favourable views of private enterprises as an efficient and legitimate mechanism for organising social and economic life (De Bondt, 2013; Saarinen et al., 2020). It seems the same logic might apply to GAFAM: right-leaning citizens may be more likely to perceive these companies as innovative and value-creating private actors, and less likely to frame them primarily as threats to democratic accountability or privacy. Though the effect size is statistically significant, it remains quite low. A standardised coefficient of $\beta = 0.157$ suggests that ideology alone explains a relatively small share of the total variance in trust. This suggests that the ideological mechanism is real but operates within a frame of political and societal factors.

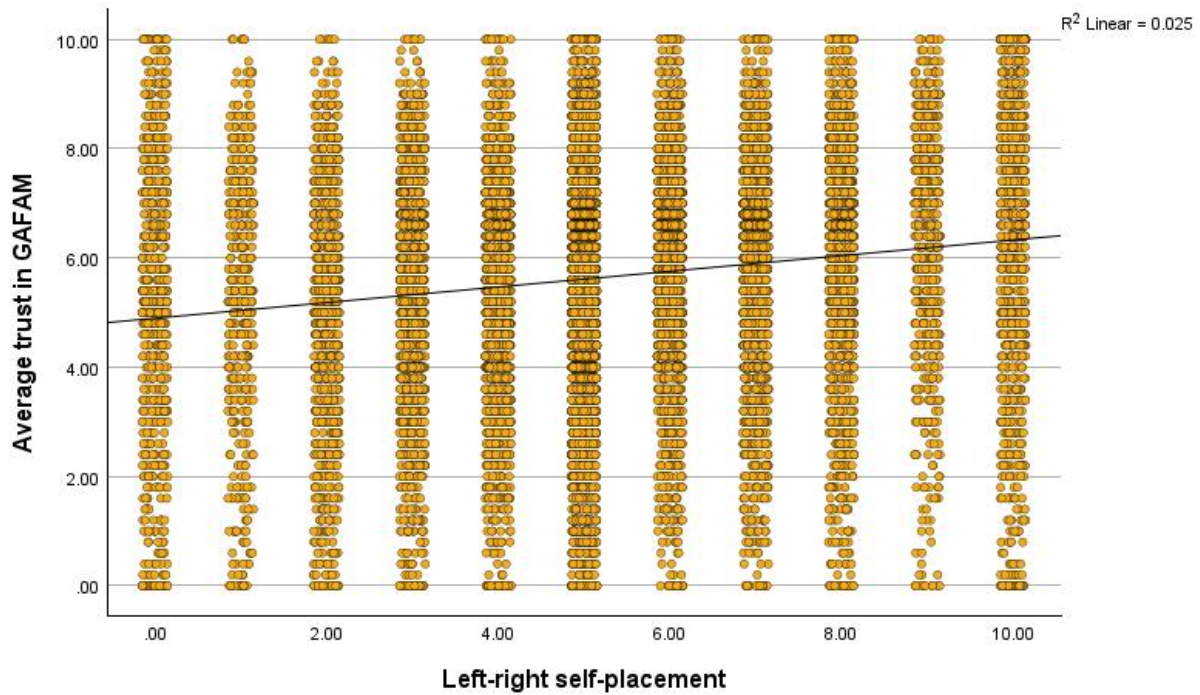


Figure 3. Trust in GAFAM across the left-right scale

Source: Big Tech Survey (Ehin et al 2024)

Note: Left-right self-placement was measured on a scale from 0 (left) to 10 (right)

Hypothesis 3 proposed that citizens who report higher satisfaction with democracy are more likely to trust GAFAM. The regression results show a positive and statistically significant relationship between satisfaction with democracy and trust in GAFAM ($B = 0.201$, $SE = 0.006$, $\beta = 0.238$, $t = 32.236$, $p < 0.001$). Indicating that for each one-unit increase in democratic satisfaction, average trust in GAFAM increases by approximately 0.2 points (see Figure 4). The model explains 5.6% of the variance in GAFAM trust at the bivariate level ($R^2 = 0.056$). However, as discussed in the multivariate analysis below, the significant bivariate relationship becomes insignificant (Model 1: $p = 0.348$; Model 2: $p = 0.387$) once controls for institutional trust and ideological self-placement are included. This difference between the bivariate and multivariate results indicates that the positive association observed at the bivariate level is largely explained by overlapping variance with institutional trust. This means that democratically satisfied citizens also tend to be more institutionally trusting, and it is the latter that drives the relationship with GAFAM trust. Therefore, on the bivariate level, Hypothesis 3 is somewhat supported.

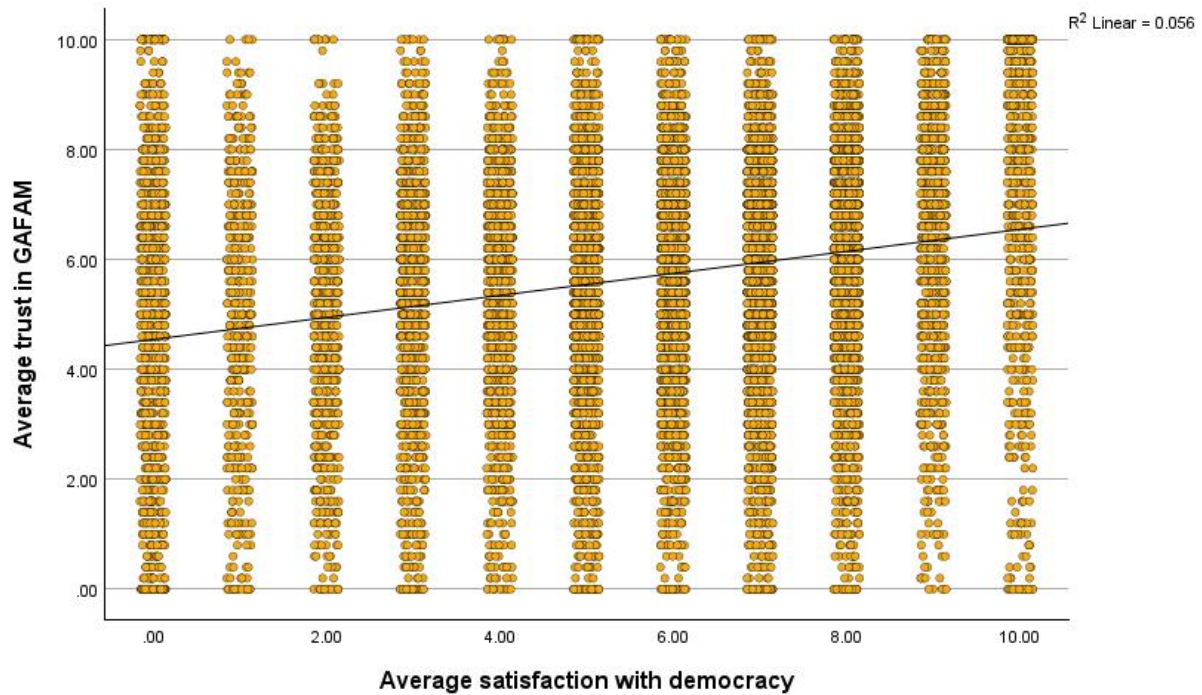


Figure 4. Trust in GAFAM across levels of satisfaction with democracy

Source: Big Tech Survey (Ehin et al 2024)

Note: Satisfaction with democracy was measured on a scale from 0 (lowest) to 10 (highest)

Hypothesis 4 predicted that citizens who report stronger trust in political institutions are also more likely to trust GAFAM. The simple regression analysis strongly supports this expectation. Trust in institutions shows a statistically significant relationship with trust in GAFAM ($B = 0.073$, $SE = 0.002$, $\beta = 0.314$, $t = 43.568$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that a one-unit increase in institutional trust corresponds to approximately a 0.07-point increase in trust in GAFAM (see Figure 5). Among the three bivariate models, this variable has the largest standardised coefficient ($\beta = 0.314$) and the highest explained variance ($R^2 = 0.099$), confirming that institutional trust is the strongest single predictor of trust in GAFAM. This finding provides the clearest empirical support for the central theoretical argument of this thesis. The spillover mechanism suggests that trust carries over from one domain to another (Høyer & Mønness, 2016; Saarinen et al., 2020). Citizens who trust political institutions and regulators are also more likely to trust Big Tech companies. This aligns with the idea of “cooperative responsibility”, where the legitimacy of platforms depends partly on state oversight (Helberger et al., 2017). When people believe that regulation is effective, they are more likely to see GAFAM firms as accountable and trustworthy. The strength of this effect – both at the bivariate level ($\beta = .314$, $R^2 = .099$) and in the fully controlled multivariate model ($\beta = .071$, $p < .001$) –

further underscores that institutional trust is correlated with GAFAM trust and serves as a genuine and stable predictor across model specifications.

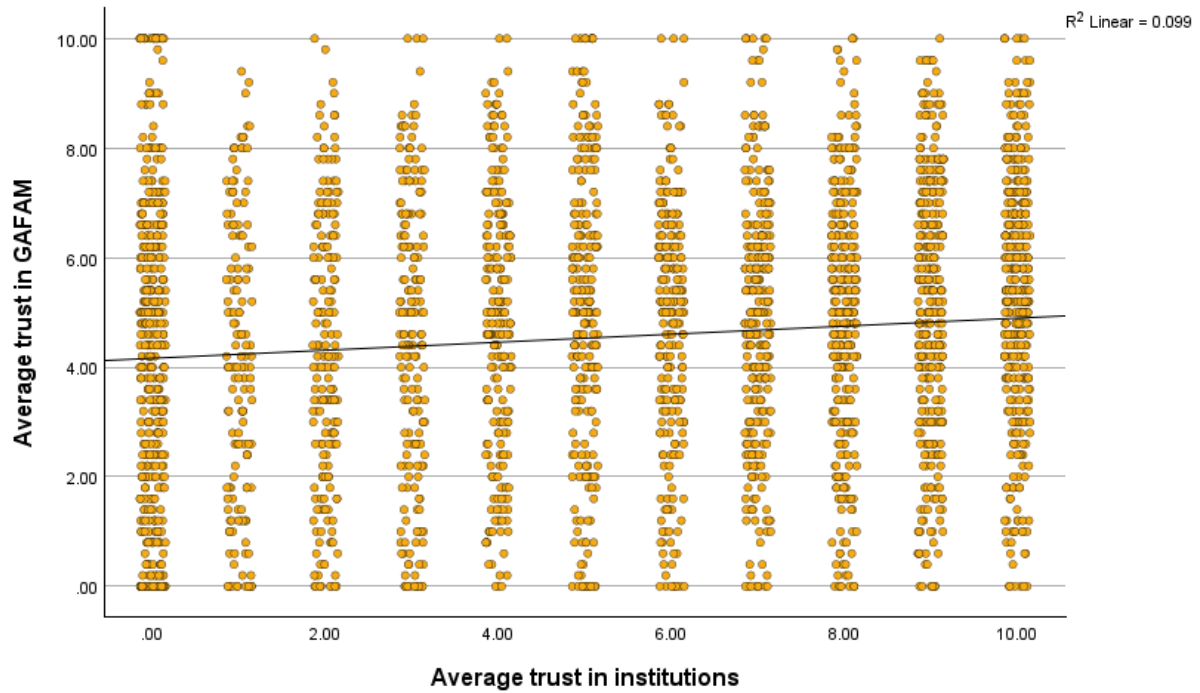


Figure 5. Trust in GAFAM across levels of trust in institutions

Source: Big Tech Survey (Ehin et al 2024)

Note: Trust in political institutions was measured on a scale from 0 (lowest) to 10 (highest)

3.3. Multivariate analysis

Going further into Hypothesis 4, the sub-hypotheses 4.1 and 4.2 examine whether trust in national political institutions and trust in the European Parliament operate through distinct mechanisms. The relationship between institutional trust and trust in GAFAM firms is assessed at the individual level within each country. That is, correlations are calculated using individual respondents but reported separately for each country to illustrate cross-national variation in the strength of the association. Table 2 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients between each institutional trust component and trust in GAFAM. All coefficients are statistically significant at the $p < 0.001$ level, indicating a consistent positive association across all national contexts. The pattern across countries suggests that trust in the European Parliament tends to produce some of the strongest correlations in Eastern European countries such as Estonia ($r = 0.466$), Hungary ($r = 0.417$), and Slovakia ($r = 0.409$). This may reflect a particular dynamic in post-communist member states, where EU institutions are associated with democratic consolidation, legal reform, and accountability mechanisms that national institutions have not provided with

equal reliability (Lühiste, 2006). Confidence in the European Parliament may serve as a stronger signal of regulatory legitimacy than trust in domestic political institutions, which carry the weight of more mixed historical associations. In contrast, in established Western European democracies such as France and Germany, correlations across both national and EU institutional trust are somewhat more evenly distributed, reflecting a more integrated perception of multi-level governance.

Table 2. Correlation between institutional trust and trust in GAFAM by country

	Trust in the national parliament	Trust in the national government	Trust in the national legal system	Trust in the European Parliament
Estonia	0.358	0.388	0.408	0.466
Denmark	0.214	0.277	0.196	0.320
Finland	0.294	0.305	0.286	0.392
Germany	0.351	0.333	0.309	0.397
Italy	0.332	0.299	0.275	0.387
Netherlands	0.372	0.374	0.287	0.346
Poland	0.283	0.202	0.315	0.267
Sweden	0.244	0.310	0.168	0.311
Belgium	0.353	0.340	0.296	0.383
France	0.398	0.378	0.388	0.410
Hungary	0.205	0.156	0.241	0.417
Ireland	0.310	0.281	0.289	0.318
Portugal	0.312	0.311	0.308	0.391
Slovakia	0.223	0.159	0.241	0.409
Spain	0.312	0.217	0.302	0.365

Note: Pearson correlation coefficients reported. All coefficients are statistically significant at the $p < 0.001$ level.

Table 3 presents the results of the OLS regression models examining the relationship between political attitudes and trust in GAFAM companies. Model 1 includes the main independent variables without sociodemographic controls (N = 17,358); Model 2 adds controls for age, gender, and education (N = 17,179); and Model 3 (N = 17,179) adds country-specific controls.

The valid sample decreases slightly when sociodemographic controls are added, due to listwise deletion.

As seen in Model 1 ($N = 17,358$), trust in political institutions is the strongest predictor. The positive, highly significant coefficient ($\beta = 0.070$, $p < 0.001$) indicates that individuals who trust political institutions more are more likely to trust GAFAM companies. This demonstrates the suggested theory that confidence in political institutions extends to trust in large private actors – the spillover mechanism identified at the bivariate analysis. In contrast, satisfaction with democracy does not show a statistically significant effect ($\beta = 0.008$, $p = 0.348$), indicating that general evaluations of democratic performance are not directly associated with trust in GAFAM, when institutional trust is held constant.

Both linear ($\beta = 0.127$, $p < 0.001$) and squared terms of ideology ($\beta = 0.013$, $p < 0.001$) are positive and statistically significant, indicating a curvilinear relationship between left-right self-placement and trust in GAFAM. The positive coefficient for the squared term suggests a U-shaped pattern, with individuals at both ends of the ideological spectrum reporting higher levels of trust than those in the centre. This implies that ideological extremity, rather than direction alone, is associated with greater trust in GAFAM. This disproves Hypothesis 2, which proposed that ideological extremity, regardless of direction, may be associated with more negative attitudes toward GAFAM firms. The U-shaped pattern may be explained by citizens at the political extremes holding more intense and coherent political worldviews that translate into more definite evaluations of all powerful actors, including Big Tech. As discussed in Chapter 1, both extremes were expected to be more sceptical about Big Tech. However, the extreme right-wing respondents' strong pro-market orientations may override any scepticism about corporate power. Similarly, extreme left-wing respondents may hold critical views of capitalism in general but express relatively high trust in technology services that they use extensively and perceive as socially useful. 'Trust' as a single variable in this survey was measured as a general orientation rather than an endorsement of GAFAM's political or economic role, meaning respondents at both extremes may express high trust in the companies as service providers while holding different views on whether they should be regulated more. These interpretations are speculative and are supported, but cannot be proven by this thesis. Overall, Model 1 explains 11.9% of the variance in trust in GAFAM ($R^2 = 0.119$), indicating moderate explanatory power. As trust is shaped by a wide range of individual experiences,

media consumption patterns, and firm-specific events, cross-sectional survey data cannot fully capture it; the R^2 of 0.119 represents a meaningful and theoretically interpretable result.

Model 2 ($N = 17,179$) extends the analysis by adding sociodemographic controls: age, gender and education. Trust in political institutions continues to exhibit a strong, positive association with trust in GAFAM ($\beta = 0.071$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that trust in political institutions remains a key explanatory variable even after individual-level characteristics are accounted for. Satisfaction with democracy remains statistically insignificant (though it has a positive correlation in the bivariate analysis) ($\beta = 0.003$, $p = 0.699$), thus the effect is not strong when controlling for individual characteristics. Both the linear ($\beta = 0.128$, $p < 0.001$) and the squared terms of ideology ($\beta = 0.012$, $p < 0.001$) retain their significance and direction, confirming the stability of the curvilinear relationship.

Among the control variables, age has a statistically significant negative effect ($\beta = -0.019$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that older respondents tend to express lower levels of trust in GAFAM companies. This is consistent with research on trust in digital technologies, which suggests that trust is an important condition for the adoption and use of new technologies. In the Estonian context, Ehin & Solvak (2021) show that socio-demographic factors, political cues, and evaluations of digital and institutional factors shape trust in e-voting. Older generations may be more likely to view these firms with greater caution, due to less engagement with their services and higher scepticism towards digital solutions. Gender is also significant: female respondents report lower levels of trust than male respondents ($\beta = -0.397$, $p < 0.001$). The coefficient suggests that being female is associated with a reduction of approximately 0.4 points on the GAFAM trust scale. Suggesting that gender may also shape digital trust, like risk perceptions and scepticism of Big Tech. This supports previous research, which has identified that women often report greater privacy and security concerns than men, and they are also less likely to adopt some technically demanding protective behaviours (McGill & Thompson, 2021).

Education exhibits differentiated effects: individuals with lower levels of education report higher levels of trust ($\beta = 0.201$, $p = 0.003$), while those with higher levels of education report lower levels of trust ($\beta = -0.199$, $p < 0.001$). The reference category is secondary education, meaning that both low- and high-educated respondents differ from those with secondary education, but in opposite directions. The finding that higher education is associated with lower trust in GAFAM is consistent with previous research, which suggests that more educated

citizens have better cognitive skills and are thus better equipped to process information about regulations, power, and misconduct (Norris, 2011), which are all important in evaluating powerful private actors. The higher trust among low-educated respondents may reflect the opposite, a simpler relationship with digital services, uncomplicated by knowledge of the political economy of digital capitalism. The inclusion of control variables increases the model's explanatory power, with R^2 rising from 0.119 to 0.149, indicating that the sociodemographic characteristics contribute meaningfully to explaining trust in GAFAM but do not displace the political attitudes as the primary drivers. The relatively modest increase in R^2 (0.03) confirms that political attitudes – particularly institutional trust and ideological self-placement – account for the majority of explained variance. At the same time, individual characteristics such as age, gender and education provide important but secondary contributions.

Model 3 ($N = 17,179$) adds country fixed effects to the previous regression. Model 3 increases the adjusted R^2 to 23.2%, indicating that national context plays an important role in shaping attitudes towards Big Tech and that levels of trust differ systematically across countries. The central relationship observed in the previous models remained highly stable after accounting for country-level differences, suggesting that the effects of political attitudes are not solely driven by cross-country variation. The ideology findings remained consistent across all three models. In Model 3, both the linear ideology term ($B = 0.119$, $SE = 0.006$, $p < 0.001$) and the squared ideology term ($B = 0.009$, $SE = 0.002$, $p < 0.001$) were positive and statistically significant. The positive coefficient for the squared term further confirms the existence of a curvilinear, U-shaped relationship between political ideology and trust in GAFAM companies. Although the coefficient's significance decreased slightly after introducing country fixed effects, the overall pattern remained unchanged. Trust in political institutions is still the strongest predictor of trust in GAFAM. The coefficient for institutional trust remained positive and highly significant ($B = 0.074$, $SE = 0.002$, $p < 0.001$), strongly supporting the idea that trust may function as a generalised orientation extending across both political and technological institutions. Satisfaction with democracy also became statistically significant once country fixed effects were included ($B = 0.035$, $SE = 0.008$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that, within countries, respondents who are more satisfied with democracy are also more likely to report higher levels of trust in GAFAM. The emergence of this relationship after controlling for country-specific effects shows that cross-national variation may previously have obscured this association. Unlike Models 1 and 2, Model 3 supports Hypothesis 3.

The effects of the sociodemographic control variables also remained largely stable in Model 3. Age continued to have a statistically significant negative association with trust in GAFAM ($B = -0.018$, $SE = 0.001$, $p < 0.001$). Gender differences also persisted, with female respondents reporting significantly lower levels of trust compared to men ($B = -0.374$, $SE = 0.030$, $p < 0.001$). Education had mixed results. Respondents with higher levels of education exhibited lower trust in GAFAM firms ($B = -0.177$, $SE = 0.032$, $p < 0.001$), whereas the coefficient for lower education was no longer statistically significant ($B = 0.100$, $SE = 0.064$, $p = 0.118$). Overall, the consistency of the main coefficient across all models demonstrates that the observed relationships between political attitudes and trust in GAFAM companies remain strong after accounting for demographic factors and country-specific differences.

Out of the three models, Model 3 provides the most complete and statistically relevant explanation of trust in GAFAM. It includes the main political attitude variables, the individual-level control variables, and country fixed effects. Model 1 establishes the baseline relationship between political attitudes and trust in GAFAM. It shows that institutional trust and ideology are already significant predictors before demographic characteristics are added. Model 2 then tests whether these relationships remain stable after controlling for age, gender, and education. The results show that the main political effects persist, suggesting that the relationship between political attitudes and GAFAM trust is not simply a result of demographic differences among respondents. Model 3 adds the national context by controlling for country-specific differences. This is important because respondents are nested within different political and institutional environments, and average trust in GAFAM may differ across countries for reasons beyond individual-level attitudes alone. The increase in adjusted R^2 across the models also supports the conclusion that Model 3 is the strongest specification. Model 1 explains 11.9% of the variation in trust in GAFAM, while Model 2 increases this to 14.8% after the inclusion of sociodemographic controls. Model 3 explains 23.2%, showing that national context contributes substantially to the model's explanatory power. At the same time, the key findings remain stable across all three models. Overall, Table 3 shows that political attitudes matter, demographic factors add further explanatory value, and country context is essential for the most accurate interpretation of trust in GAFAM.

Table 3: The effect of political attitudes on trust in GAFAM

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Trust in GAFAM		
	(1)	(2) + added controls	(3) + country fixed effects
Ideology (centred)	0.127*** (0.007)	0.128*** (0.006)	0.119*** (0.006)
Ideology ²	0.013*** (0.002)	0.012*** (0.002)	0.009*** (0.002)
Trust in institutions	0.070*** (0.002)	0.071*** (0.002)	0.074*** (0.002)
Satisfaction with democracy	0.008 (0.009)	0.003 (0.009)	0.035*** (0.008)
Age		-0.019*** (0.001)	-0.018*** (0.001)
Low Education		0.201** (0.067)	0.100 (0.064)
Higher Education		-0.199*** (0.033)	-0.177*** (0.032)
Gender		-0.397*** (0.032)	-0.374*** (0.030)
Constant	4.111*** (0.042)	5.293*** (0.067)	4.685*** (0.085)
Observations	17,358	17,179	17,179
Adjusted R ²	0.119	0.148	0.232

*Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; Model 3 additionally includes country fixed effects (dummy variables for each country), which are not reported in the table.*

Hypothesis 5 proposed that respondents' age moderates the relationship between political self-placement and trust in GAFAM. To test this, a moderation analysis was conducted using PROCESS in SPSS, with left-right self-placement as the focal predictor, age as the moderator and total trust in GAFAM as the outcome variable. The interaction term between left-right ideology and age is statistically significant ($B = -0.003$, $SE = 0.0004$, $t = -6.92$, $p < 0.001$). The

negative interaction coefficient indicates that the positive effect of right-leaning ideology on trust in GAFAM gets weaker as age increases. In other words, people who score higher on the self-placement scale (meaning they are more right-leaning) are more likely to trust GAFAM. If these people are younger, this relationship becomes stronger – the effect of ideology on trust gets weaker as age increases. Thus, the association between ideological self-placement and trust in GAFAM is stronger among younger respondents. Therefore, Hypothesis 5 was supported.

The moderation findings add an important generational dimension to the interpretation of Hypothesis 1. Among younger citizens, the link between right-wing ideology and trust in GAFAM firms may be more direct, reflecting both a stronger pro-market cultural orientation among younger right-leaning individuals and a more positive engagement with digital services in general. As respondents age, the ideological signal weakens, possibly because older citizens evaluate GAFAM through lenses that are less tied to ideological commitments and more shaped by accumulated experiences with specific platforms, media narratives, and concerns about digital security. This suggests that the political meaning of Big Tech is generationally altered: for younger citizens, ideological preferences play a more active structuring role, while for older citizens, company-specific or experiential factors may dominate. The policy implication is that strategies to build public trust in digital governance, such as clearer communication about regulatory enforcement, may need to be tailored to different generational audiences.

Table 4. Age as a moderator of the relationship between ideology and trust in GAFAM

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Trust in GAFAM		
	B	SE	T
Ideology (centred)	0.138***	0.0067	20.44
Age	-0.022***	0.0011	-20.98
Ideology x Age	-0.003***	0.0004	-6.92
Constant	5.654***	0.0165	342.48
R ²	0.051		
N	17,358		

Note: OLS regression coefficients are unstandardised. Ideology and age are mean-centred.
p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.001*

3.4. Country-Specific Effects of Political Attitudes on Trust in GAFAM

The last statistical analysis presents the results of country-specific OLS regression models that estimate the effects of three political attitude variables – trust in political institutions, satisfaction with democracy, and left-right ideological self-placement – on trust in GAFAM firms (see Table 5 in the Appendix 1). Each country is treated as an independent analytical unit, and the models report unstandardised coefficients (B), standard errors (SE), and standardised coefficients (β) for each predictor. This allows both a direct comparison of effect sizes across countries and an assessment of the statistical significance of each predictor within each national context. The country-level regression builds on and extends the pooled cross-national analysis presented earlier in this chapter. This enables an examination of how the relationship between political attitudes and trust in Big Tech varies depending on national political and institutional contexts. This section discusses each predictor in turn, drawing on the national patterns in Table 5 to assess the generalisability and contextual variation of the findings.

The strongest finding across all 15 countries is the positive and statistically significant effect of trust in political institutions on trust in GAFAM ($N = 17,358$). Without exception, every country in the sample returns a significant positive coefficient for this variable (all significant at $p < 0.001$), with unstandardised coefficients ranging from 0.345 in Hungary to 0.522 in the Netherlands. The standardised coefficients are similar: France has the highest β value at 0.423, and Denmark has the lowest at 0.290, but across the sample, the effect is consistent and substantively meaningful. This uniformity is interesting given the variation in political context across the sample, from established Nordic countries with high baseline institutional trust to more contested democratic environments in Hungary and Slovakia (Valgarðsson et al., 2025). The strong predictive significance of institutional trust strongly reinforces the theoretical spillover argument developed in Chapter 1 (Høyer & Mønness, 2016). Citizens who trust their national parliaments, governments, legal systems, and the European Parliament to govern fairly and competently appear to extend that confidence to the corporations operating within those regulatory frameworks. This finding holds regardless of whether a country is characterised by high or low institutional trust in absolute terms – it is the individual-level variation in trust, rather than the national average, that drives the association.

This similarity is significant as it rules out a straightforward contextual explanation. It might be expected that the spillover mechanism would be stronger in countries with higher average

institutional trust (like Denmark or Finland) (Valgarðsson et al., 2025), where citizens' general orientation toward institutions is more consistently positive. The data do not support this; Estonia, for example, returns one of the highest β values (0.452), despite being a smaller, post-communist state with institutional trust patterns that differ from those of the Nordic countries. Similarly, Hungary and Slovakia, where democratic quality has been subject to international criticism and scrutiny (Gorokhovskaia et al., 2026), still produce significant and meaningful institutional trust effects ($\beta = 0.308$ and 0.327). This consistency across varied democratic contexts suggests that the spillover mechanism is a fundamental feature of how citizens relate to powerful private actors in general, rather than merely a function of high-trust political cultures. It also implies that efforts by EU member states to build public confidence in democratic institutions, whether through transparent governance, visible enforcement of digital regulation, or effective communication, may have positive downstream effects on citizens' trust in Big Tech as well.

Satisfaction with democracy, by contrast, shows a substantially more varied pattern across countries. In the bivariate analysis, this variable was significant, but in the multivariate regression, it became statistically insignificant after controlling for other predictors. However, the country-specific models reveal that in the majority of countries, the effect of democratic satisfaction on trust in GAFAM is positive and highly significant. The Netherlands records the highest unstandardised coefficient ($B = 1.910$, $\beta = 0.377$, $p < 0.001$), followed by France ($B = 1.700$, $\beta = 0.428$, $p < 0.001$), Finland ($B = 1.700$, $\beta = 0.428$, $p < 0.001$), and Germany ($B = 1.466$, $\beta = 0.338$, $p < 0.001$). These countries have been among those visibly involved in recent European debates on digital sovereignty, platform regulation, and the role of the Digital Services Act in protecting democratic processes (Bradford, 2023; Reuters, 2025) and maintain relatively high public confidence in state institutions (Valgarðsson et al., 2025). In contrast, Hungary ($B = 0.655$, $\beta = 0.185$) and Slovakia ($B = 0.726$, $\beta = 0.201$) return weaker coefficients, though both remain significant at $p < 0.001$.

This variation suggests that the relationship between democratic satisfaction and trust in Big Tech is not systematic but instead conditioned by the national political context. Where democracy is seen as more functional and effective, citizens' satisfaction with the system appears more closely tied to their confidence in the large private actors operating within it – possibly because the well-functioning democracy is associated with capable regulatory institutions that effectively hold corporations accountable. Where democratic functioning is more contested, this link is weaker, though not entirely absent. France has a standardised

coefficient of 0.428; democratic satisfaction is the strongest predictor of trust in GAFAM among French respondents, even surpassing institutional trust. This may reflect France's particularly prominent public discourse around digital sovereignty and the EU's regulatory capacity. Citizens' perceptions of democratic effectiveness may become closely linked to whether they believe powerful technology firms are being adequately governed. The French debate around digital governance and protection has been especially visible (Datta & Hartmann, 2025), potentially making the link between democratic satisfaction and GAFAM trust more salient for French citizens than for respondents in countries where this debate is less politically prominent.

Estonia stands out as the only country where the satisfaction with democracy coefficient is only marginally significant ($B = 0.403$, $SE = 0.129$, $\beta = 0.105$, $p < 0.01$). While still statistically significant, the weaker effect may reflect Estonia's highly digitised state, where e-governance and technology have been central to national identity and state-building since the 2000s (United Nations, 2024). Estonian citizens may evaluate GAFAM through a lens that is more technology-specific and less mediated by general assessments of democratic quality. The relationship between democratic satisfaction and trust in private technology firms may be differently structured when the state itself has become a digital actor – creating a different experimental baseline from which citizens evaluate commercial digital platforms.

Left-right ideological self-placement shows the greatest cross-national variation, indicating that country-specific political debates and understandings of left and right labels shape the association between ideology and trust in GAFAM. In 13 out of the 15 countries, the coefficient is positive, supporting the general pattern identified in the previous regression analysis and consistent with Hypothesis 1. However, the weight of the effect varies a lot: Portugal records the highest standardised coefficient for ideology ($\beta = 0.255$), followed closely by Denmark ($\beta = 0.235$) and Slovakia ($\beta = 0.230$), while countries such as Italy ($\beta = 0.106$), Hungary ($\beta = 0.059$), and Finland ($\beta = 0.149$) show more modest effects. Poland and Estonia are both statistically insignificant. Poland is the only country where the ideology coefficient is negative ($B = -0.107$, $\beta = -0.024$), though the result is statistically insignificant; thus, there is no meaningful relationship between political self-placement and trust in GAFAM among Polish respondents. Estonia does not have a negative coefficient, but the relationship remains insignificant ($B = 0.172$, $SE = 0.180$, $p > 0.05$).

Overall, Table 5 illustrates that the previous regression analysis captures the basic trends, but there is still cross-national variation in both the strength and significance of individual predictors. Trust in political institutions becomes the most powerful predictor of trust in GAFAM, reinforcing Hypothesis 4 that institutional trust shapes how citizens evaluate powerful private actors. Satisfaction with democracy and ideological self-placement operate more ‘in context’ – national political cultures, democratic quality, public discourse, etc., mostly shape their effects. These findings suggest that it is important to treat European public opinion as a collection of national attitudes that respond to pressure in unique ways that are shaped by national contexts.

Conclusion

The objective of this thesis was to examine how political attitudes shape citizens' trust in Big Tech companies across the European Union. Large technology corporations have become central actors in contemporary democratic societies. Companies such as Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft no longer operate only as market actors providing digital services. They also shape communication, influence access to information, structure digital participation, and control important parts of the online infrastructure through which economic, social and political life takes place. Despite the growing societal importance of these corporations, political science research has devoted limited attention to explaining citizens' trust in them. Existing trust research has traditionally focused on political institutions, governments and democratic systems. Trust in private actors has been studied more often through the perspectives of consumer behaviour, marketing, or experience. This thesis addressed that gap by examining whether political self-placement, satisfaction with democracy, and trust in political institutions influence citizens' trust in GAFAM firms across 15 EU member states.

The theoretical framework was built around the argument that trust in Big Tech should not be understood purely as a consumer-based or technological phenomenon. Instead, trust in digital corporations was approached as politically embedded. The thesis argued that citizens evaluate powerful private corporations through many of the same political and institutional lenses that shape trust in governments and public institutions. The three central explanatory factors were examined: left-right ideological self-placement, satisfaction with democracy, and trust in political institutions. The theoretical expectation was that citizens who trust political institutions may extend their trust to large corporations operating within the same political and regulatory environment. Similarly, political self-placement was expected to shape attitudes toward private corporations, especially because right-leaning political positions are generally associated with stronger support for market-based solutions and private enterprises. Satisfaction with democracy was also expected to influence trust in GAFAM, as citizens who perceive democratic systems positively may be more likely to trust actors operating within those systems.

To examine these relationships, the thesis used a large cross-national survey dataset collected in autumn 2024 as part of the Horizon Europe-funded INCA project. The dataset included

responses from 22,618 individuals across 15 EU member states (Ehin et al., 2024). The empirical analysis combined descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, OLS regression models, moderation analysis, and country-specific regressions. This methodological approach enabled the identification of both general European patterns and differences across national contexts.

The findings showed that trust in Big Tech is strongly connected to political and institutional attitudes. The clearest and most consistent result throughout the analysis was the relationship between institutional trust and trust in GAFAM. Citizens who expressed higher trust in political institutions were also significantly more likely to trust Big Tech companies. This relationship remained stable across pooled regression models. It was also statistically significant in all country-specific regressions: no country in the sample showed a non-significant relationship between institutional trust and GAFAM, underscoring the importance of trust in both political and corporate environments. This was the strongest empirical finding of the thesis and provided strong support for the central theoretical argument concerning spillover effects between institutional and corporate trust. The consistency of this finding across very different national contexts is particularly important. The relationship was strong in both high-trust Nordic democracies and in countries where trust in political institutions and democratic quality has been more contested. This suggests that institutional trust functions as a broader orientation through which citizens evaluate powerful actors in society. Citizens who perceive political institutions as legitimate, capable, and trustworthy are also more likely to believe that large corporations operating within those systems are properly regulated and accountable. Thus, trust in Big Tech appears closely connected to confidence in the institutions responsible for governing digital markets and enforcing rules within them.

The findings also showed that ideology plays an important role in shaping trust in GAFAM. Respondents who identified as more right-leaning generally expressed greater trust in Big Tech companies. This supported the theoretical expectation that pro-market political orientations are associated with greater confidence in private corporations. Citizens positioned further to the political right may be more likely to perceive large corporations as innovative, efficient, and legitimate actors within society. By contrast, left-leaning respondents may be more sceptical toward concentrated corporate power and more supportive of stronger regulation. Although the effect of ideology was weaker than the effect of institutional trust, it remained statistically significant across the main regression models, indicating that political self-placement

contributes independently to how citizens evaluate Big Tech. At the same time, the analysis revealed that the relationship between ideology and trust in GAFAM was more complex than initially expected. Contrary to the hypothesis predicting lower trust among ideologically extreme respondents, individuals at both ideological extremes reported higher levels of trust in Big Tech than respondents positioned near the political centre. This finding suggests that attitudes towards digital corporations do not align neatly with traditional assumptions about ideological moderation and extremism. One possible interpretation is that citizens at ideological extremes engage with Big Tech through different political concerns. Some may view these corporations positively because they are seen as alternatives to traditional institutions. In contrast, others may value their technological innovation or communicative power despite broader scepticism toward political systems. Although this thesis could not fully explain this unexpected finding, it demonstrates that the relationship between ideology and trust in Big Tech is more nuanced than a simple left-right division.

The findings concerning democratic satisfaction were more conditional. Satisfaction with democracy was positively associated with trust in GAFAM at the bivariate level, meaning that citizens who were more satisfied with how democracy functions also tended to trust Big Tech companies more. However, this relationship weakened substantially once institutional trust was included in the regression models. This indicates that democratic satisfaction and institutional trust overlap to a considerable extent, with institutional trust carrying most of the explanatory power. Nevertheless, democratic satisfaction became significant again when country fixed effects were introduced, suggesting that national political context influences how democratic satisfaction relates to trust in Big Tech. The country-specific analyses further demonstrated that the strength of this relationship varied substantially between countries.

The moderation analysis added an important generational dimension to the findings. The results showed that age moderates the relationship between ideology and trust in GAFAM. More specifically, the positive relationship between right-wing ideology and trust in Big Tech was stronger among younger respondents and weakened with age. This suggests that younger generations may connect political identity more closely with digital platforms than older generations do. Younger citizens have grown up in highly digitalised societies where digital platforms are embedded in everyday communication, information access, and participation. As a result, political and ideological orientations may shape their perceptions of digital corporations more directly. Older respondents, by contrast, may evaluate Big Tech through

different experiences and concerns, including privacy issues, technological scepticism, or accumulated experience with specific platforms.

The country-specific regressions provided further insight into how trust in Big Tech differs across Europe. While institutional trust remained significant in every country, the effects of ideology and democratic satisfaction varied considerably across national contexts. In some countries, democratic satisfaction was strongly associated with trust in GAFAM, while in others the relationship was weak or absent. Similarly, ideology predicted trust differently across countries, and in some cases, it was not statistically significant. These findings demonstrate that although general patterns exist across Europe, public attitudes toward Big Tech remain shaped by national political cultures, institutional histories, and public debates surrounding digital governance.

Several broader conclusions emerge from these findings. First, trust in Big Tech should not be understood solely as a matter of consumer experience or technological familiarity. Citizens evaluate digital corporations politically. Broader orientations toward political authority, institutional legitimacy, and governance shape their trust in these firms. Second, the findings highlight the importance of political institutions in shaping public trust in private digital actors. Citizens who trust political institutions are more likely to believe that large technology corporations are effectively regulated and held accountable. Third, the findings show that European public opinion on Big Tech is not fully uniform. National political environments continue to matter, even in the context of highly globalised digital platforms.

This thesis contributes to the literature in several ways. It provides one of the first systematic cross-national analyses of the political determinants of trust in Big Tech within the European Union. It also connects the political trust literature with research on digital governance and corporate legitimacy. The findings demonstrate that spillover mechanisms identified in institutional trust research extend into the digital corporate sphere. In addition, the thesis highlights the importance of considering national context when studying public attitudes toward global digital corporations. The findings also have practical relevance. The European Union has invested considerable political and institutional resources into building a regulatory framework for digital markets through policies such as the GDPR, the DMA, and the DSA. This thesis suggests that the perceived legitimacy of regulatory institutions influences how citizens evaluate the corporations operating within them. Public trust in institutions, therefore, matters not only for democratic governance itself, but also for how citizens perceive and

evaluate Big Tech companies. Efforts to strengthen institutional legitimacy, accountability, and regulatory transparency may therefore also influence public trust in digital corporations.

Several limitations should nevertheless be acknowledged. The data used in this thesis were cross-sectional, which means causal relationships could not be definitively established. The survey relied on online panels rather than random probability sampling, which may have overrepresented more digitally engaged respondents. The thesis also combined trust in five companies into a single GAFAM trust measure, even though citizens may evaluate different firms differently. Future research could therefore benefit from firm-specific analyses, longitudinal designs, and qualitative approaches examining how citizens understand and interpret trust in digital corporations.

Overall, this thesis demonstrated that trust in Big Tech is deeply connected to political and institutional attitudes. Citizens who trust political institutions are also more likely to trust large technology corporations. In the European context, trust in digital corporations is therefore closely linked to trust in the political systems and regulatory institutions that govern them.

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Appendices

Appendix 1.

Table 5. Country-specific effect of political attitudes on trust in GAFAM firms.

	Trust in institutions			Satisfaction with democracy			Left-right ideology		
Country	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
Estonia	0.482***	0.032	0.452	0.403**	0.129	0.105	0.172	0.180	0.032
Denmark	0.360***	0.036	0.290	1.265***	0.139	0.266	0.998***	0.125	0.235
Finland	0.472***	0.034	0.378	1.512***	0.134	0.315	0.652***	0.128	0.149
Germany	0.413***	0.029	0.376	1.466***	0.118	0.338	1.038***	0.167	0.176
Italy	0.459***	0.033	0.389	1.333***	0.123	0.316	0.412***	0.119	0.106
Netherlands	0.522***	0.036	0.394	1.910***	0.138	0.377	0.828***	0.130	0.185
Poland	0.358***	0.036	0.297	1.361***	0.138	0.294	-0.107	0.139	-0.024
Sweden	0.405***	0.038	0.309	1.378***	0.151	0.265	0.712***	0.126	0.168
Belgium	0.413***	0.029	0.378	1.389***	0.115	0.328	0.788***	0.126	0.177
France	0.462***	0.029	0.423	1.700***	0.104	0.428	0.798***	0.112	0.201
Hungary	0.345***	0.031	0.308	0.655***	0.100	0.185	0.265*	0.130	0.059
Ireland	0.416***	0.032	0.339	1.379***	0.125	0.296	0.976***	0.149	0.182
Portugal	0.443***	0.031	0.374	1.347***	0.113	0.316	1.049***	0.111	0.255
Slovakia	0.367***	0.031	0.327	0.726***	0.104	0.201	1.006***	0.125	0.230
Spain	0.363***	0.027	0.347	0.982***	0.093	0.277	0.705***	0.100	0.188

Note: Unstandardised coefficients (B) reported. SE = standard error; β = standardised coefficient.

** $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. No sociodemographic or other controls were used for these regression models.*

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